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How to Start & Maintain a Gender Support Organization

by Dallas Denny & Holly Boswell

In 1986, Holly founded the Phoenix Transgender Support Group in Asheville, North Carolina. Phoenix is an open group. Dallas became a member of Phoenix in 1989. In 1991, she founded Atlanta Gender Explorations, which is modeled on Phoenix. Both groups are non-sexual, and serve persons with a wide variety of gender issues.

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Asheville, NC 28814
704-253-9882

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Box 77562
Atlanta, GA 30357
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For many of us, finding a support group is the lifeline we need, for there we meet people who we scarcely dared believe existed— those who are like us. There we share experiences, obtain referrals, make friends, and gather knowledge. There we can safely divulge the feelings that we have been holding inside us. There we may feel, for the first time, truly at home.

Some of us are lucky enough to have support groups which are conveniently near. Others must drive long distances. But there are many who either cannot afford to travel or who live just too far away to conveniently attend a support group.

Whether you live in Newfoundland, Fargo, North Dakota, or Iuka, Mississippi, it is safe to say that there are other transgendered people nearby, and perhaps even in the same town. The problem is locating them. Transsexual people, transgenderists, and crossdressers hardly wear signs proclaiming their status, and besides, they may be fearful of exposure or in denial. How to make contact?

The sad fact is that many transgendered people will never be reached. But those with the courage to look about and make repeated attempts to find help— and we say repeated because those first cautious reachings out are frequently rebuffed or ignored— can eventually link up with the paraculture: that marvelous network of support groups, information services, newsletters, magazines, service providers, and social clubs that serve those with gender dysphoria. But what if you live in Newfoundland? What if you live in Fargo, North Dakota? What if you live in Iuka Mississippi? What if the nearest source of support is hundreds of miles away? What are you to do?

Well, you can do one of two things: you can gird your loins and gas your car and make the journey, or you can form a local support network.

“What, me?” you say? “I can’t do that. I’m just an average person.” Well, Virginia Prince was just an average person and she formed FPE, which eventually became Tri-Ess. Christine Jorgensen was just an average person and she found the courage to go to Scandinavia to seek sex reassignment. Lou Sullivan was just an average person and he wrote *Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual*. Merissa

Sherrill Lynn was just an average person and she had a vision of IFGE. Mr. Peabody was just an average person and he invented the WayBack Machine.

Face it. You can do it. Here's how:

1. *Decide who you will serve. Be as inclusive as possible.*

Persons with gender issues are highly variable, and if you are the only source of support around, you should think very hard before excluding certain factions, making them as alone as you once were— but feeling more so because of their exclusion. You may be transsexual, and so your thoughts may run to transsexualism, but what about the crossdresser? You may be a heterosexual crossdresser. What about the homosexual crossdresser? What about the transgenderist? What about female-to-male people, who, after all, make up half of our population? What about significant others, who often have tremendous problems coping with their transgendered partners? Our suggestion to you is that whatever the focus of your group, you should not be exclusionary, but should welcome anyone with a gender conflict, white, black, straight, gay, male, female, HIV+, TS, TG, CD, SO, LSMFT, or any other variant of what Billie Jean Jones, elsewhere in this issue, calls the Genderbet Soup. If the focus of the group seems too broad, you may decide to break into special interest groups (or SIGs, as they are called by computer user groups) according to self-identification or interest.

If you decide to limit yourself to one sub-group, then you will have a closed group. Otherwise, your group will be open. The relative merits of open and focused groups are addressed elsewhere in this issue by Holly Boswell.

Even if you do close your group to some faction of the community, don't leave others out in the cold. Surely you remember how that felt! Treat them with care and consideration. Talk to them, help them to understand themselves, and help them to find or start an organization or group which can help them.

2. *Decide upon provisional policies.*

You should give serious consideration to how your group will function. Is it a social group, or is it a self-help group, or is it both? How often will you meet? How long will your meetings last, and what will you do? Will you charge money to attend, and if so, how much? Will refreshments be served? What behavior will be considered acceptable, and what will be considered unacceptable? What will be your security requirements?

You will be asked to help people find psychologists, surgeons, and endocrinologists, so the sooner you have a policy about referrals, the better. You should decide whether to endorse the Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. We strongly suggest that you do, for they are the only standards for the hormonal and surgical treatment of transsexual persons, and they provide common-sense safeguards that can save a lot of human misery.

Second, you should decide what referrals you will and will not make, and under what conditions you will make referrals. You may decide to refer the individual only to mental health caregivers (psychologists, counselors, social workers, psychiatrists) and to support groups and information clearing-houses like AEGIS and IFGE. You may decide to give the names directly to the individual's therapist and let him or her make the referral. If you decide to refer the individual to endocrinologists, plastic surgeons, and surgeons who do sex reassignment surgery, you should ask yourself whether the individual is ready for the service they are requesting. It is common, for example, for those who are just starting out to seek specific information about a physician who does sex reassignment surgery— years before they realistically need this information. Their query will serve only to impose needless work on the surgeon and his staff. Similarly, it would be in violation of the Standards of Care to refer an individual to an endocrinologist or other physician for hormones before he or she is in possession of a letter from a clinical mental health worker authoriz-

ing them. You must decide whether to take the individual's word that such a letter exists, or whether to ask to verify it with the letter-writer (which would require a release of information form).

3. *Choose a name.*

It will pay to give some thought to this, for changing the name of your group, once it is established, will take some doing. Your name should say exactly what you will do, without being unwieldy. Exercise your creativity and your sense of humor. Some groups use historic names, like Texas' Boulton and Park society, which is named after two gay crossdressers who were arrested in Victorian England. Holly's group, the Phoenix Transgender Support Group, is named after the fabulous mythological bird which arises from its own ashes. Many groups and organizations with long names are called by their acronyms: you get bonus points for coming up with a name that, while telling what you do, makes an acronym that is a word, like LIFE (Long Island Femme Expression). Double bonus points if your acronym makes a word that is gender-related. The word AEGIS, for example, means shield or auspices, and so describes the organization's purpose. And no, AEGIS' founder didn't sit up nights thinking of it; she spent all of thirty minutes on the name. [And by the way, AEGIS isn't a support group, but a national clearing-house for information about gender dysphoria. There's no rule that says you must start a support group. Perhaps, like Billie Jean Jones or Phoebe Smith, who publish, respectively, *GenderFlex*, (formerly *TV Guise*), and *The Transsexual Voice*, you would rather publish a newsletter. Perhaps, like Sister Mary Elizabeth, you would rather start an information service (J2CP). Perhaps, like Anne Ogborn, you would rather start an advocacy organization. Perhaps, like Phyllis Frye, you would rather put together a conference (she is the driving force behind the First National Conference on Transgender Law). Perhaps, like Mjka Scott and others in England, you would rather put together a political action committee like their Press For Change.]

4. Rent a post office box.

A few dollars will buy you a secure place to receive your mail in whatever name you wish, both personal and organizational, and will provide protection of your privacy. If you move across town, or if the leadership of the organization passes out of your hands and into another's, the post office box will remain constant. This is important, for you will be listing that post office box just about everywhere.

5. Get a dedicated telephone line.

If you open your private phone line to gender inquiries, you'll be getting calls at 2 AM. You may be able to put up with this for a short time, but at some point, you will want to get a dedicated telephone line. If money is tight, you can probably make do with a RingMaster number, at least for a while. If you get a dedicated line at a later date, you can use the RingMaster number, and so avoid having to re-publicize your group's phone number.

Most telephone companies now support RingMaster, which is a separate number which will cause a distinctive ring on your telephone, letting you know if the incoming call is personal or gender-related. You can answer the phone with different greetings, depending upon the ring: "Hi. This is Bill Jones." "Hi, this is the Fargo Multidenominational Transcontinental Support Group, B.J. speaking. We bend gender. How can we help you?" Be careful not to confuse the rings!

Most answering machines unfortunately can't yet distinguish the Ringmaster calls from your other calls, so you may want to leave an ambiguous but reassuring message so that callers won't freak out and go back in the closet for twenty years. "Good evening and thank you for calling. You've reached M.T.S.G. This is also Bill Jones' private number. We'd be happy to return your call or send you information about us. Please speak slowly and distinctly after you hear the beep." If you open your private phone line to gender inquiries, you'll need to convey to all group members guidelines for phone etiquette.

The Need for Open Support Groups

by Holly Boswell

Until recently, most transgender support groups have been focused on the two most obvious segments of the gender community: heterosexual crossdressers and transsexual people. These two segments have specific needs and concerns that are often best addressed in a focused manner that requires exclusivity.

Meanwhile, as increasing numbers of people with gender issues present themselves and seek support, we have come to see how truly diverse we are. Transgenderists, androgynes, crossdressers who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, prostitutes, HIV+ persons and PWA's, and many other gender alternative people will continue to lack meaningful support until there are groups that are open to them. This is why more and more new groups are welcoming *all* people with gender issues.

A special kind of sharing takes place in an open group. One gets to see the entire issue of gender displayed in a fascinating array of aspects. And when male and female significant others and counselors are participating, the spectrum is even more colorful. Rigid stereotypes of what a crossdresser or transsexual person is supposed to be are shattered. Sexuality is seen as the fluid energy it really is, independent of gender. Topics pop up spontaneously and a wealth of experience and viewpoints are shared. In fact, with only a few gentle nudges from a facilitator, the discussion is usually so lively that no programs or meeting agendas are necessary. This is peer counseling at its best.

Most people who come to a support group are looking for companionship and information. Many are in a formative stage of discovering

who they really are and what to do about it. The open dialogue that takes place in this kind of group gives everyone a chance to hear the perspectives of others who are living or experimenting with all sorts of gender options they may or may not have even thought of. Members can also feel quite comfortable testing these options, since conforming to standards is not expected. This is especially valuable for novices, who might otherwise be seduced into the only option offered by a focused group. How many would-be transsexual people might benefit more from this open approach? We all need to find our place in the rainbow of gender, and to understand that our colors may shift over time.

There ought to be a support group within a hundred miles of every transgendered person. At the grassroots level, more of these people will be served if the first group in their area is open. As members increase, specialized focus groups can follow. If an area already has one or more focused groups— which is often the case in large cities— it's probably time to form an open group to fill in the gaps.

Because the gender community was first organized by members of focused groups, there has been a troubling lack of cohesiveness that has resulted in polarization and petty squabbling. The heterosexual crossdressers and the transsexual persons are like two columns on a weak foundation. With the new trend of open support groups, that foundation will be strengthened. And as open support groups begin to nurture more columns of gay or bisexual crossdressers, transgenderists, female-to-male transsexual persons, androgynes, and more, we may have a structure that can support a roof. With the spirit of unity and inclusiveness that open groups promote, we may indeed create the temple of a community we can all call home.

These guidelines might include the confidentiality of the phone number (i.e., don't give it to others), hours, and who to ask for when they call.

6. Have business cards and stationery designed and printed.

Your support group at this point consists of a post office box and a Ring-Master number, but nobody needs to know that. If you want to stay small, you can do without fancy stationery, but if you want to make a good impression on those with whom you'll be corresponding, have attractive business cards, letterhead, and envelopes made up. It will pay if you spend a little money for an attractive design and a good printing job. The more impressive your materials look, the more seriously you'll be taken. It will really help here to consult a graphic artist, who will do a custom design for you for less than you might think. Don't go cutesy and do cards with pretty women on them. Don't scrimp on paper quality either, and for God's sake, don't use pink paper! Look at the letterhead of the large corporations and try for the same look, but don't directly copy anyone's logo, unless you like dealing with corporate lawyers.

Rather than spelling things out, you may want to use only your organization's initials and address on your envelopes, for you'll be sending mail to people whose well-being could be jeopardized by an envelope that said something like "Important gender-related information enclosed!" Be discrete, especially when mailing to a street address rather than a post office box.

7. Do a press release, using your letterhead.

Prepare a press release, stating your purpose, your philosophy, any projects or products you might have, and membership criteria for your support group, and have a few hundred copies run off. It will be important to address issues like security requirements, dues, and group policies early on, at least enough to add structure to the organization until officers can be elected and permanent policies decided

upon. You may want to do a second broadside, or incorporate, in the first, educational information for the many people who don't know about gender dysphoria.

In time, you may want to expand these materials into a brochure. After all, you'll be sending it to prospective members, helping professionals, and other gender organizations for years to come.

8. Get listed locally.

You should get your name in as many publications and in as many other places as possible. Local gay organizations, crisis lines, medical referral services, hospitals, colleges and universities, physicians, psychologists, clergymen, electrologists—all will be happy to hear that there is somewhere to refer their clients with gender dysphoria. Your community may have an alternative newspaper which will list you for free or run a free ad, or you may have to (horrors) pay for an ad.

Telephone contact is great, but follow up your calls with a note on your letterhead. That's what you got it for. Your letters should be neatly typed or computer-printed. Be sure to include your press release and your business card. Your correspondents will be impressed with so professional an organization, and will have something concrete to hang onto instead of trying to find that scrap of paper on which they jotted down your phone number.

You can also put up your cards and press releases on bulletin boards in bars, supermarkets, and other places where large numbers of people will be likely to see them. What can it hurt?

9. Get listed within the gender community.

You are now listed locally, and will start getting calls. Why not get hooked up nationally so that other organizations can refer people to you? IFGE, AEGIS, and other organizations get calls from all around the world, and will be happy to have a group in Fargo, North Dakota to refer to—and so will that little support group in Iuka Mississippi, who just got a call from your next

door neighbor in Fargo. Send your press release with a nice cover letter, and ask that your business card (you might even have a small ad drawn up) be printed in their magazine or newsletter. You can also contact nationally known gender clinics and service providers, who also get calls from your neighbors in Fargo.

The paraculture's most comprehensive listing of support groups and other services is printed in each issue of *The TV-TS Tapestry*, which is published about three times a year by The International Foundation for Gender Education. This listing is a gateway into the gender world. All of the players, both major and minor, are listed there. Write to as many organizations as you can afford, asking to exchange publications and information. The magazines and newsletters which will start to appear in your box will help to build the sense of community, make you friends, and give you opportunities. Be sure to pass the booklets on to other group members after you read them. They can, in fact, be the beginning of the group's gender library.

10. Get online.

If you own a computer and modem, you should consider subscribing to an on-line service like America OnLine or CompuServe, or better yet, get an account from an internet provider. List your e-mail address (address) with your address and phone number; and post notices about your group in places like the Usenet groups alt.transgender and soc.support.transgender. You'll be surprised by the response.

You should consider having a web page as well. It will enable you to keep information about your group available online 24 hours a day; it'll save money in postage, and reach people who would never call or write.

11. Consider a newsletter.

Newsletters can be fancy and time-consuming, or folksy, quick, and dirty. If you have a computer or even a typewriter, you can crank out a couple of pages every month, telling about

your local activities, and send copies around the town and around the country, and to your members (when you get them). Other groups will be impressed, and (here's the best reason for doing a newsletter) will put you on their exchange list. With their newsletters, you'll be able to monitor the happenings of the gender world and ultimately, better serve your members.

Do yourself and the world a favor, though. Get a dictionary, and, if you have a computer, buy a spelling checking program and use it. Have your newsletter read for clarity and style and spelling by someone who knows how to proofread—and preferably by two people who know how to proofread. It has to do with that image thing again.

12. Devise security procedures.

With the above in place, you'll start getting calls and letters from people anxious to meet you and join your support group. You'll need some way to screen people to make sure they're okay, and they'll need some way to screen you to make sure that you're okay. Ideally, there should be a secure, well-lighted meeting room which is in a neutral location. Practically, this may not be possible. You'll find that a lengthy phone conversation will give you a good idea about the needs and interests of most callers. You may decide that a telephone screening will suffice, or you may want to meet the caller in person. Whatever you decide, you should formulate screening and other security procedures and have them in place early on—ideally, before your first incoming call. It would be a good idea to include your security requirements on the press release or brochure that you send around.

Group members must be told and told again of the importance of respecting the privacy of others. It would be a good idea to make them sign a statement agreeing to do so. It will be necessary to instruct group members about proper protocol. For instance, what purpose will it serve for members to know the last names of other members? (Answer: none). What should they do if they run into another group member at the mall? (Answer:

ignore them, especially if the person is with someone else. Contact should be made only if the other person indicates that they want to make contact).

Some of your group members will have two names, and it may prove difficult to tell which one to use in different circumstances. Each member should be asked to indicate if it is all right to receive mail and telephone calls, and which name should be used.

Remember: Lives are at stake here. Loose lips sink ships. A slip of the

Consider that you may be starting something that may become bigger than you are. Welcome the talents and contributions of others, and don't try to maintain absolute control. Sure—you're always going to think of it as "your" group, but in fact, it isn't. It's the members' group, and you should keep that in mind at all times.

tongue or pen can cause great damage to the lives of your group members. It's a good policy to never give out phone numbers without explicit permission. It makes life a little more difficult, but a lot safer. You can get out of the middleman position by obtaining the permission of the caller to give his or her number to the second party.

We've included a copy of the Atlanta Gender Explorations group's confidentiality and security statement, which is modeled on Phoenix Transgender Support Group in Asheville, North Carolina—Holly's group. Like her, you may want to have group members sign a waiver of responsibility so that they cannot blame you for everything that goes wrong in their lives.

13. Find a meeting place.

If you are comfortable with getting together in your house or at the home of another group member, then you will not need to find a meeting place. Otherwise, you will need to find a place which is secure, safe, inexpen-

sive, and which offers your members freedom to come and go crossdressed. You may want or need a location with facilities for members to change clothes. Certain churches (of the more liberal persuasion) may be open to giving you free or low-cost meeting spaces, and so may gay support centers or bars. Helping professionals may let you have space, and may even serve as a resource and sponsor for the group.

Once your group reaches a critical size, a small contribution from each member will pay for rent of a hotel suite and refreshments, with money left over for printing costs and stamps. Until then, you may have to compromise. One thing to consider: you will probably want to keep the actual location of your meetings secret, divulging that information only to people who have passed the security requirements.

14. Make the group self-supporting.

You may have to dig a bit into your pocket for start-up expenses, but several hundred dollars will go a long way. Consider the alternative—lots of travel, which will not be inexpensive. You can either give your organization money, or make a loan to it, with full expectation of eventual payback. Perhaps you should consult an attorney about the latter.

You can't exactly have a transgender car wash or bake sale (although with the increasing acceptance of transgendered people, perhaps the first gender walkathon is not so far in the future). There are, however, various ways to make money, limited only by your creativity.

First, you can ask your members for dues. You should keep fees low, certainly less than ten dollars per meeting, and lower, if at all possible. If you have to go to some time and trouble to screen prospective members, you might charge them a modest screening fee, which will go into the organization's treasury. You might also ask members for voluntary donations in excess of the dues.

You can sell subscriptions to your newsletter, especially to those folks who want to monitor what is happening, but are not yet ready to come out. You

Maintaining The Organization

Starting the group is only half the fun (and half the work). Keeping it going is the real challenge. While the hare may provide a good role model for getting your organization started, the tortoise provides a better model for maintaining it. Reputations are built on performance over time; no matter how well things might start off, they will soon fall apart without consistent follow-through.

There is a great deal of labor involved in the everyday running of even the most modest support group: Answering the phone; replying to correspondence; keeping databases up to date; writing articles for the newsletter; designing and printing the newsletter; licking stamps and stuffing envelopes; planning meetings and other activities; going to the post office and the office supply store; dealing with emergencies of your members; networking with helping professionals and other organizations. It's far too much for one person to do, but volunteers are sometimes worth just what they're paid—tasks assigned to others may or may not get done.

With luck, your group will soon have a core of dedicated members—even two or three is better than an overworked and rapidly burning out founder. This group, especially if it meets regularly for planning purposes, can make newcomers feel welcome and infuse them with a sense of belongingness; hopefully, they will soon be helping. Committees of two or three people can work separately, bringing proposals or finished products

to general meetings and sparing the larger group the monotony of having to work everything out in detail.

Of course, not every group is destined to become large—nor should that be the case. Your organization will quickly find its level. If you're living in a small town, it may work effectively as a loose network to keep a half-dozen or so people in communication. If you're living in a large city without other groups, or if you've founded a regional or national organization which meets needs no one else is addressing, you may find yourself coping with rapid growth. Moderate, controlled expansion is preferable to chaotic growth; if you spend all your time putting out fires, it will be difficult to make strategic plans for the future.

It's important to keep the focus of the group consistent. Leadership styles of the group's officers will vary, but the support and philosophy should remain the same. Obviously, if the organization is in serious trouble, it may be time to revisit the bylaws and restructure meetings, but this is rare. Certainly, it should not happen every year just after election time.

It's for this reason that bylaws are important. Bylaws provide the blueprint for the organization. They should be general (allowing the group's leadership to make changes in things like frequency of meetings and dues without having to amend them, but they should provide clear general guidelines within which officers must work.

Most transgender organizations take pains to protect their members

from sexual predators. Unless yours is the exception, you will need to make provisions for dealing with "trans fans." It's important, however, to distinguish between those interested in sleeping with as many transpeople as possible, and those who are seriously searching for a partner. The transgender community tends to become a bit hysterical at the idea that someone—especially a male—may actually like or love one of us. Women regularly attend crossdressers' conventions in search of husbands; it's not fair to discriminate against someone out of hand solely because he's male. Predators are usually easy so cheesy they're easy to detect. Of course, transgendered members of your group may fall in love with one another; this should not necessarily be discouraged, as long as there is not a predatory aspect to the relationship.

Be sure to return phone calls (it's all right to state in your answering machine message that the group has no budget for returning long-distance call. You should respond quickly to mail and e-mail, as well. If your standard information brochures do not address the writer's questions, you can scrawl a message on a note. You needn't write a letter just to let someone know the name of an electrologist.

You'll quickly find that maintaining your group is a lot of work. The work is hard, and the rewards are few, but if you delight in helping others, you'll go to sleep every night knowing that you've done some good that day.

Atlanta Gender Explorations Support Group Confidentiality & Security Statement

Our members are diverse, and have varying needs. Many take risks to join us. Marriages, children, reputations, and livelihoods are all on the line. We owe each other the promise of confidentiality. It is a crucial, mutual concern.

1. Personal information is extremely confidential, and should not be discussed either outside the group or with other group members. Under no circumstance should you give anyone the phone number or address of a group member without their express approval.

2. What is discussed within the group needs to stay within the group.

3. Our meeting place is secret. We

do not need errant thrill seekers or unfriendly parties on our doorstep. You must not disclose our meeting location.

4. You are welcome to bring partners, friends, or family members to meetings, but this must first be cleared with one of the group officers.

5. When asking for group members on the phone or when sending mail, be careful of the name you use. If in doubt, check with one of our officers or facilitators first.

6. When encountering other group members in public, you should ignore them unless they indicate that they are willing to greet you. You must not go to the homes or places of busi-

ness of other group members without specific invitation from that group member.

I hereby acknowledge that my involvement with the A.G.E. support group is voluntary, and that the support group exists solely for purposes of peer support and self-help. I accept responsibility for my own welfare. I realize that I am not obligated to take the advice or suggestions of the group leaders or members, and will not hold them accountable for my own well-being or actions. I agree not to divulge information about the meeting place or members, and to follow the rules of the support group.

(Signature)

should calculate printing expenses and postage and then charge somewhat more, but don't price yourself out of business. Remember that you're doing this to help people and not to make a buck.

After your organization has reached a healthy size, there will be other ways to make money. You can maintain a clothing exchange, put on a pageant, have a fancy \$20 a plate fundraising dinner, or have a spaghetti supper for five dollars a plate. And when the ball is really rolling, you can incorporate as a nonprofit entity, file for 501(c) federal nonprofit status, announce that contributions are tax-deductible, and go after grant money and charitable donations.

15. Structure of meetings.

Most of your members will have personal issues which they want to discuss. The group meetings should not have so much structure that this is not possible. "I know you're having a breakdown, Ronnie Jane, but it's time to play 'Walk on the Wild Side' by Lou Reed." In fact, time for personal issues should be built into the schedule for each and every meeting. You may want to have guest speakers at some of the meetings, and at others you may want to throw out a topic for general discussion: "What is the best way to deal with children? Should they be told? When?" You should be careful to select topics of interest to all of the members. We guarantee you that female-to-male crossdressers and transsexual people will not want to talk about makeup (although they may get a kick out of the lingerie show!).

16. Start a lending library.

You can use the magazines and newsletters you get in a newsletter exchange to form the core of a lending library which includes inexpensive paperback self-help books, newspaper clippings, articles from mainstream magazines, and articles and stories from the group members. You can ask individual members to donate a book. You'll need to keep close tabs on the materials, though, for otherwise they will tend to walk.

17. Build the organization.

As your membership grows, you may need to elect officers and appoint staff and committees to be in charge of various activities. Remember that in any organization, 10% of the members do 90% of the work. Recruit new talent. It'll make your life easier.

If you can afford a dedicated telephone line with Call Forwarding, then you'll be able to transfer the "hot line" to volunteers. If a writer emerges, you may be able to place the burden of the newsletter in capable hands. No matter what talents an individual might have, there will be something they can do. Duplication and mailing of the newsletter is a burdensome task, but someone in the group may be happy to make that their contribution. Someone else may be happy to screen prospective members.

Upon election, the president should officiate at meetings. One of the first tasks of the officers should be to devise a constitution or a set of bylaws, and address the provisional statement of policy under which you have been operating. The officers may revise or expand it, or they may decide to let it stand.

18. Don't hold the organization back.

Consider that you may be starting something that may become bigger than you are. Welcome the talents and contributions of others, and don't try to maintain absolute control. Sure—you're always going to think of it as "your" group, but in fact, it isn't. It's the members' group, and you should keep that in mind at all times. You didn't really want to run a support group for the rest of your life, did you? When the group is in capable hands, you might want to back away and watch it fly.

19. Remember that lives are at stake.

Despite the generally light-hearted tone of this article, you must remember that the support you will be providing will have profound effects on the lives of others, as well as on your own. The needs of the individual must

come before the needs of the organization. You must also maintain yourself in as professional a manner as possible at all times, helping people as much as possible, yet at the same time meeting your personal needs.

What does that mean, you may ask? Simple: you should keep within the limits of your knowledge, and not stray beyond; you should follow commonly accepted practice like endorsing the Benjamin Standards of Care for transsexual people. You should learn as much as you can and respect the judgment of those who know more than you do, and defer to them when appropriate. All referrals should be in the best interest of the client. You should delegate authority rather than trying to do everything by yourself. And above all, you should maintain strict confidentiality of your group members and those who make inquiries regarding the group.

One of the common traps that those who run support groups fall into is overextending themselves. When this happens, burnout occurs, and then phone calls and letters from those wanting information go unanswered, prospective members go unscreened, and newsletters go unpublished. Please keep in mind that a phone call or letter may be the only time an individual finds the courage to reach out. If you don't have the time or energy or inclination to deal with those seeking help or to publish your newsletter, find someone in your organization who does, or at least refer those who call or write elsewhere. And please be sensitive; it's easy to make a remark on the phone or on paper which will send someone back in the closet for two or three years.

There is of course much more to running a support group than we could possibly mention in these pages. We haven't told you, for instance, what to do when you get a midnight call from someone in crisis, or what to do if someone breaks group protocol. Like the rest of us, you'll have to learn as you go. But hopefully, our suggestions will empower you and give you direction if you do decide to form your own support group.

Good luck if you decide to give it a try.

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