



Making Breast Cancer Support Groups Work for Lesbian and Bisexual Women:

Tips for Increasing Inclusivity

This tip sheet is for facilitators and organizers of both professionally-led and peer-facilitated breast cancer support groups. It is designed to help you better serve and include lesbian and bisexual women in your group.

Although there are specific breast cancer support groups for lesbian and bisexual women in some areas, this is not the case in the vast majority of communities. Often there are simply not enough resources or potential participants available, and it makes more sense for lesbian and bisexual women to join general breast cancer support groups. As well, some lesbian and bisexual women may prefer to attend a group that is open to all women.

Lesbian and bisexual women may already be part of your breast cancer support group, or they may attend in the future. This tip sheet will enable you to take concrete steps towards including and supporting lesbian and bisexual women in your breast cancer support group.

Planning and Preparation

- Participate in an anti-homophobia or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) cultural competency workshop.
- Meet at a venue that is LGBT positive.
- Advertise your group in LGBT newspapers and/or through LGBT community groups.
- If your group has a nondiscrimination policy, make sure it includes sexual orientation. Then include this policy in the group's promotional materials.
- Incorporate visible signs of lesbian and bisexual inclusivity:
 - Include lesbian and bisexual resources if you provide resource material to your group.
 - Use rainbow symbols, which represent LGBT communities, or LGBT positive space symbols (see www.positivespace.utoronto.ca for a downloadable sticker) on materials where appropriate.

During the Group

- Mention at the beginning of each meeting that the group welcomes all women with breast cancer. You could say something like:

“Many different women may come to our group – older and younger women, women of diverse races, women with and without disabilities, heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women, women who are partnered and women who are single, women with children and women without children, and women who are different from each other in other ways. All of these women are welcome here. What we do have in common is a breast cancer diagnosis, which is what this group is about.”

- Use inclusive language in the group, and during the intake process if you have one. For example, say “partner” instead of “husband” or “boyfriend.”
- Use gender neutral language when referring to or asking about someone's partner unless you already know their partner's gender.
- Include the following statements in your group guidelines:
 - Respect the diversity of the women in the group
 - We can agree to disagree
- If a group member reacts with discomfort or disapproval to lesbian or bisexual members or expresses homophobia or biphobia in any other way, it is important to step in as soon as possible to ensure the group remains a safe space for all. You may want to:
 - Refer back to the guidelines and policies you have in place.
 - Challenge the member on her comment and point out its inappropriateness in the group.
 - Say something like:

“This group is open to all women, and we are here to support each other as women with breast cancer. We don't have to be the same in other ways or agree on everything, but we do need to respect each other.”



Check your Assumptions

- Don't assume that all your group members are heterosexual, even if no one has come out as lesbian or bisexual.
- Don't assume that lesbian and bisexual women who attend your group will necessarily come out. Just because no one is out doesn't mean there are no lesbian or bisexual women there – they may decide not to disclose or they may be waiting to see if it feels safe to come out.
- Remember that lesbian and bisexual women may have children and/or be concerned about fertility issues related to breast cancer treatment.

Specific Issues for Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Lesbian and bisexual women may have some specific issues related to their breast cancer experience. They may want to talk about these in a support group setting, so it is helpful for facilitators to have some understanding of what these issues may be.

This section draws in large part from themes that emerged in the Lesbians and Breast Cancer Project report “Coming Out About Lesbians and Cancer.” (www.lesbiansandcancer.com) The final two points reflect issues that arose in a lesbian and bisexual women's breast cancer support group piloted by the Making Us Visible project.

Specific issues and experiences for lesbian and bisexual women with breast cancer may include:

- Disruption of “body sameness” in same sex relationships
- Lack of family support due to estrangement based on sexual orientation
- Support could come from other places, such as LGBT communities or chosen family
- The “could be me” factor, where female partners and other lesbian and bisexual women may identify very strongly with the possibility of getting breast cancer. This can have both positive effects (understanding and support) and negative effects (distancing and fear).
- Lack of appropriate support for female partners and children and lack of recognition for same-sex partners in medical or support settings
- Fallout from treatment:
 - Short hair may be more accepted in lesbian and bisexual women's communities
 - Programs that offer make-up tips to help women feel better about their appearance during treatment may be right for some lesbian and bisexual women but may not fit at all for others
 - Loss of physical strength may be particularly challenging to a lesbian or bisexual woman's identity and lifestyle
 - Breast loss – there are different views on whether this matters more or less for lesbian and bisexual women compared to heterosexual women, as well as ideas around breast prostheses or reconstruction related to gender identity and presentation
- Feelings of already limited options for dating or relationships being reduced further
- Heterosexism, homophobia and/or biphobia in medical or support settings. This can include reactions such as disbelief, disgust, poor treatment, discomfort or assumptions of heterosexuality, such as being asked about one's husband.
- Decisions around coming out or not coming out in medical or support settings. This can include weighing whether disclosing lesbian or bisexual identity will make things better or worse.
- Feeling isolated and excluded from the LGBT community due to having breast cancer.
- Comparing HIV/AIDS with breast cancer and feeling that gay and bisexual men receive more support around HIV/AIDS than lesbian and bisexual women do around breast cancer.

For more information on facilitating breast cancer peer support groups, contact Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada at 1-888-778-3100 or dcauz@willow.org

