



Starting a Breast Cancer Support Group for Lesbian and Bisexual Women

This tip sheet is designed to help you start a breast cancer support group for lesbian and bisexual women.

Why might you want to start a lesbian and bisexual women's breast cancer support group?

- To create a safe space where lesbian and bisexual women living with breast cancer can support each other without fear of facing homophobia, biphobia, or heterosexism.
- To provide culturally specific support for women with the shared experience of being lesbian and bisexual.
- To create opportunities for meaningful connections between lesbian and bisexual women with breast cancer.

Getting Started

Find out what other breast cancer and cancer support groups are available in your area. Here are some questions to consider:

- Are there any local breast cancer support groups or organizations you could promote your group to?
- Does your group overlap with any existing groups? (such as a broad LGBT cancer support group or a cancer support group for lesbian and bisexual women and partners?)
 - If yes, you may want to talk to the organizers of these groups to find out their perspective on the need for a breast cancer support group for lesbian and bisexual women. You may also want to ask if they would be willing to help promote such a group.

Planning

- Hold the group in a venue that is LGBT oriented or LGBT positive.
- Have lesbian or bisexual women and/or women who have had breast cancer facilitate the group if possible.
- Ensure that any facilitators who are not lesbian or bisexual women receive appropriate cultural competency training.

Promotion

- Promote the group broadly in both LGBT and cancer settings, including hospitals and cancer centres
- Make use of email, listserves, website listings and free community papers
- Ask for advertising sponsorship from local LGBT newspapers and other media
- Don't forget about word of mouth – talk the group up in every situation you can!

It can be challenging to reach lesbian and bisexual women with breast cancer.

When doing outreach through mainstream cancer organizations, you may not know if LGBT announcements are posted widely or if only openly LGBT clients are offered this information. It can also be challenging to recruit through LGBT organizations as women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer may not be as involved in LGBT communities as they might have been prior to diagnosis.

Try not to become discouraged if you are finding it difficult to reach women for your group. If the number of women attending the group or expressing interest stays low, you want to consider expanding your group to include lesbian and bisexual women with any type of cancer.

It may take time for word to get around and for your group to develop and grow. Keep trying!



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During the Group

- Develop guidelines addressing confidentiality and issues of disclosure when meeting someone from the group in another situation. Women may not have disclosed their breast cancer diagnosis and/or their sexual identity in other settings.
- Provide lesbian and bisexual specific resources regarding breast cancer, health and local support services.
- In a group for lesbian and bisexual women, it is important to ensure that bisexual women are supported in attending. If a group member reacts with discomfort or disapproval to bisexual members or expresses biphobia in any other way, regardless of whether or not an openly bisexual woman is present, 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 mandate of the group to support lesbian and bisexual women with breast cancer
 - Challenge the member on her comment and point out its inappropriateness in the group
 - Focus on the similarities and common experiences of lesbian and bisexual women

Specific Issues for Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Lesbian and bisexual women may have some specific issues related to their breast cancer experience, which they may want to talk about in a support group setting. 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 general information on starting a breast cancer peer support groups, contact Willow Breast Cancer Support Canada at 1-888-778-3100 or dcauz@willow.org

