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# **GETTING TOGETHER**

## **HOW TO START**

## **A WOMEN'S LIBERATION GROUP**

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We have made a list of questions frequently asked during the first or second meetings, and problems that might arise in getting your consciousness-raising group started. These are suggestions and guidelines, nothing more. We hope you will find them of use.

We are not used to working in groups that we control, that are really responsive to us as people, to our ideas and our needs. Our women's groups can be as real and vital and useful as we make them.

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## **SOME QUESTIONS LIKELY TO COME UP IN THE FIRST MEETING**

### **I. Why can't we have men in the groups?**

We have all heard a great deal from men in the course of our lives about what they think women are or ought to be. It is time to examine ourselves. Because men and women have different amounts of economic and social power in this society, our behavior and often our interests differ. On the average, men have more confidence in expressing their ideas and in asserting their opinions. Often the women who most need the support of a group are those who would be least able to get a word in edgewise with aggressive and articulate men. If a man involved with a woman is present, she may modify what she says to please, to mollify, or to score points off him.

We often find ourselves unable to take seriously groups consisting only of women, because the society does not grant us dignity: "hen parties," "just us girls" "kaffe-klatches," "gossiping with the neighbors," and "picking each other apart" are the common images of women in groups. One thing a consciousness-raising group can do is change the way women relate to each other, but it can't do this if it is a mixed group.

Many of us can't discuss sexual or emotional events, marriages or past experiences honestly if men are present. Imagine the problem of a woman trying to discuss a feeling that she must pretend

orgasm, in a mixed group. Often a discussion of sex in the presence of a man becomes a form of flirtation or competition, or turns into his laying down what he prefers in the style of female objects. Women cannot find out what we have in common except in a group taken seriously that consists of other women. It is hard enough to cross the gaps of age, class, education, religion, political background and life styles that divide us!

### **II. Why don't we have a leader?**

In most of our lives, our responsibility has been focussed on home and family. We have not had the opportunity for decision making or leadership. We all need such experiences. If we don't have a leader, we can all go through the strains, tensions and fulfillment of accepting personal responsibility for making something work. All of us need to be spokeswomen for our feelings. We believe each of us, given the chance, can function effectively.

Ever since we could hear, we've been told what to do by parents, schools, employers and mates. We need to make our own decisions and we need to learn to work cooperatively, to create new structures for making decisions and relating to others. If one woman is "leader," the others will



never get the chance to learn what each can do.

We are not putting down leadership qualities per se, but stressing the importance of giving everyone a crack at developing them. Until we can all stick up for ourselves, we should shy away from structuring groups into leaders and led.

However, sometimes we so much fear leadership that no one takes responsibility for something the group has decided to do. We can be so uneasy about having even temporary structure that no one feels she has the group's permission to be the one to call a meeting or place an ad in a newspaper. When there is a need for a spokeswoman or for a project coordinator or for a chairwoman, the role should be rotated. No one should ever be forced to take on a role that makes her uncomfortable, but public speaking and writing and talking to people become easy only with practice. We can work in twos to give each other support when we falter or are stuck.

### **III. What's the difference between an encounter group and a consciousness-raising group? Aren't they both doing therapy?**

Entering most therapy we find assumptions made about us, the most important of which is that we are sick and essentially to blame for our unhappiness. Therapists usually have a masculine orientation and value the suppression of feelings and the ability to "take it." In therapy women are trained to distrust their feelings as sick and destructive and are encouraged to adopt passivity and submissiveness, to develop a non-threatening personality — someone who won't scare the neighbors.

A women's group ideally supports rather than negates a woman's identity. By sharing feelings and experiences, we find what we have in common and feel less weak and less alone. However, the aim of coming together is not to adjust each other to the way things are. We don't believe that we have trouble being "good women" or "fulfilled women" because we're neurotic. We believe there's something wrong with

those roles we're supposed to spend our lives acting out. Women's liberation believes that it isn't the case that we're too stupid or too inept to live up to our programming, but that the programming is destructive.

Consciousness-raising groups resemble therapy groups at times because personal experiences are discussed and some meetings get emotionally heavy. Further, the group may help us to change behavior, if we decide we want to. The group may offer emotional support in our struggles. But the direction of that change is not toward adjustment. We are trying to learn to communicate and to move away from seeing pain as a personal problem to perceiving the social issue. For instance, when we go around the room talking about how each of us feels about her appearance, and we hear every single woman expressing the same dissatisfaction (my breasts are too small, too big, too flabby; my stomach, my legs, my nose, my mouth, my teeth, my behind . . . !), we begin to realize we are dealing with something larger than a personal hang-up. The consciousness-raising group aims at changing our heads and our behavior but also at preparing us to change the society and the whole situation of women and men and children.

### **IV. What's the difference between a consciousness-raising group and women's studies, or a discussion group in general?**

The consciousness-raising group is personal and political. It is not a study group discussing ideas abstractly. The matter of the group is the women in it. The group is oriented toward actual change and has to deal with real life situations and real emotions and real problems. Women who are best at summarizing abstract ideas may have a hard time talking about their feelings and their fears.

Readings are useful, but mainly for getting started, introducing new ideas, getting launched again when the group has stalled. More and more women are writing about their experiences and struggles. We want to stay in touch with each other's ideas, battles and programs. We have much to learn from each other.



A group to study women's history, to create women's culture, to study the legal status of women or to teach each other to do anything women don't generally know, from how to use the services of banks to how to repair a car, are functions we can perform for each other. We can generate many such groups to share our knowledge and extend it together. Similarly we may form political education groups to understand the economy and class structure and to learn about other struggles. However, these are not primarily consciousness-raising groups.

### **HOW DO WE GET OUR NEW GROUP STARTED?**

I. We might start by discussing something everyone has read, to get over the initial awkwardness.

or

II. We can talk about what each woman imagines women's liberation to be. Or what each expects — hopes and/or fears — to get out of the group.

or

III. We can begin with a little personal history, what each woman does, her living situation, how long she has been interested and how each found out about the group.

or

IV. Each woman can briefly describe her background. We all have childhoods: they influenced us but are less threatening to discuss than recent events.

V. Whatever we start with, one simple method is to "go around the room." Each woman talks in turn. That way no one is passed over. It is vitally important that every woman speak.

VI. After the first meeting, we might want to choose topics in advance. Some groups do, some do not. We might proceed by "going around" and seeing what people need that evening. We might discuss some external event that relates to women.

VII. Topics our group might want to discuss

include:

Childhood

Mothers

Fathers

Goal conditioning

Menstruation

Dating

Sexual experiences

Marriage

Divorce

Channeling in school

Job discrimination

Childbearing

Childrearing

Children's sex roles

Sexism in education

Experiences in therapy

Why women have trouble doing what we would like to do

Ambitions

Rape

Gossiping

Violence

Attitudes toward other women

Friendship

Anger

Abortion

Our own bodies

Fear of being ridiculed

Gay women

Fear of being alone

The politics of the women's movement

Relationships to other oppressed groups

### **WHAT IF ONE OR TWO WOMEN DOMINATE OUR GROUP?**

When one or two women talk a great deal, some of us may feel we do not have a chance or that we are not as articulate. A woman may feel timid or "stupid" and afraid to express herself, because few have ever listened with respect. If some women are talking too much and some hardly at all we should talk about the problem openly. Perhaps we should use poker chips or pieces of paper for tokens. Every time anyone talks, she has to spend a token. This has worked quite well in some groups. We can also try having a rotating chair, so that every woman takes a turn, in turn.

## **THE MOST IMPORTANT GROUND RULE IS NOT TO ABUSE TRUST**

None of us should repeat what other women say — not in bed, not at the table, not on the phone. If you live with a man, he will usually ask you what the group talked about. Often he is seeking reassurance. If you **want** to, there is no reason why you shouldn't tell him what **you** said. But never, never repeat what other women said. The easiest way to destroy a group and injure other women is by gossiping about what we have heard. Groups cannot function if each woman goes home and tells the man or woman she lives with what she may have heard from other women in the group.

If we live with a woman, experience seems to indicate we would be better off in different groups. A relationship as close as being lovers or mother and daughter with another woman in the group can keep us from using the group as we might otherwise — it can inhibit what we may discuss — or we may appear as a bloc to the other women.

## **OUR GROUP CAN'T SEEM TO GET MOVING. WHAT'S WRONG?**

Nine out of ten groups start awkwardly, with long silences. When we know each other better as women, those silences go away naturally.

Sometimes women come once and don't return. At every meeting for our first five or six, we may have women new to the group. It appears that nothing is going forward. Awkwardness remains. Frequently some woman arrives who wants to argue with everybody else about why women's liberation is silly and unimportant, and a great deal of group time is used rehashing that argument. Then she may go away and not come back.

Perhaps after the first couple of meetings, we should suggest to such a visitor that she observe the group functioning and join in the general discussion, rather than taking up the whole group with the question of whether it should exist at all.

Getting underway is a straggly process and we must all be patient. If what we were doing was easy, we would not have to bother. Eventually, sometimes not until a month or six weeks later, we have a stable group and begin to talk to each other openly, to relate to each other as women and to discover that what we had thought of as our private hangups are no more individual than having two eyes and one nose, but are issues common to every woman in the room. There we begin.

## **CLOSING THE GROUP**

When we have eight to ten women we may decide to stop taking new women in at every meeting. Otherwise we will soon be too big and people will feel lost and drop out. This isn't an iron rule; none of these are, except for keeping confidence. We should get into the habit of asking our group before bringing other women. After functioning for a while, our group may feel it can take in new women again. On the other hand, if someone in our group is going through bad troubles, she might not want to have someone she doesn't yet know well present at that particular meeting. New women should be integrated into our group. At least part of a meeting should be spent introducing ourselves and giving some history of the group. With each new woman confidentiality should be stressed.

If our group gets too big, we should not be afraid to split into two. That is not rejecting each other. A group that is too big doesn't work. Some women don't get a chance to talk.

## **COMMITMENT TO THE GROUP**

No group will work if the women in it don't take it seriously and make an emotional and intellectual commitment. Women should come every week. If you really cannot come, you should call. Putting social engagements, plays or movies first indicates we are not taking the group seriously. However, missing a meeting in order to get a better perspective on the group or just to rest from what hopefully is an involving process must be respected. We do need to be honest about why we are not attending.



Not speaking up when we disagree is something women are conditioned to do, but is a habit that means that what's said in our group doesn't really deal with our own ideas, and that we are being dishonest with ourselves or other women in our group. It is better to say that we disagree or feel differently. We don't have to attack each other just because we have different experiences or perceive some things differently. But we must honestly try to communicate, or we will once again have many silences, and those silences will hide doubt and hostility.

Since we are often used to talking things over with friends but not so used to functioning in groups, we have a few bad habits that can hurt us. When we do disagree with someone in our group, often we do not say so openly. Instead we discuss our resentment with the woman or couple of women in the group we are friendly with. That serves to cut the groups into blocs and to assure that the misunderstanding or disagreement will never be cleared up or worked through. Even in cases where we will never agree, to discuss our differences in the group gives us a chance to learn from them.

We are not used to being in groups that actually function for us or are of any use to us, but we must work to learn to cooperate so that our own groups become real and vital forces. Sometimes we make our own women's groups unresponsive through an unwillingness to put effort into really trying to work problems through. All of us have been taught that problems are solved alone. Commitment involves overcoming the tendency to take difficulties off and brood over them privately with one or two friends.

We have a lot of profound reconditioning to do, all the while subject to insults and intimidations and casual put-downs daily. The problems are enormous and it's easy to get discouraged. Our groups don't always function well, but we have to stick through the rough times and invest some faith in ourselves and other women in order that things can change.

## **HOW WOMEN SOMETIMES THREATEN EACH OTHER IN CONSCIOUS-RAISING GROUPS**

We all know through experience what repression does to us, how it makes us frightened, unsure of our ideas and unable to act. Discovering our repression is painful and creates mistrust and anger as well as joy and high energy. We must use this energy to confront ourselves and others. We don't want to turn this anger inward, as so many of us have learned to do, to hurt ourselves. Anger turned inward is often experienced as depression.

Sometimes anger is misused by being turned against other members of the group, rather than against those who have actually hurt us in the past or are hurting us now, or against the institutions that are holding us down or denying us a fair chance. Sometimes women become angry with other women in the group who remind them of themselves — or their past selves. We have to try to be conscious of these feelings, although we are not in a group to act out encounters with each other but to give support.

We must try to express our negative feelings directly but carefully — not by a frontal attack or by gossiping or putting the other woman down when she is not there — but by honestly explaining what the problem is. Often we can get past uneasiness and mistrust into a better sense of what the other person is like — and often that is not as we had imagined.

We can learn from each other's lives at all ages, and we must try not to focus discussions just on women with children, or just on women who are married, or just on women living with women. We need to be sensitive to clues we give each other about how we are feeling, especially if those clues indicate a woman feels put down or withdrawn or unable to talk. We can become bored or restless when an evening's discussion centers on a phase of life we think is behind us, or one we have not yet experienced. We have to learn to respect our differences.



We sometimes experience differences as an attack. A woman who has children will hear a woman who has decided to have none saying so, and will experience that as a criticism of her choice. A woman who is happy in a monogamous relationship may feel attacked when another woman talks about her non-exclusive relationships. Every woman should feel that she can talk honestly and be received with respect, no matter how different her life is from the other women in the group. We are too divided from each other by small differences that have little to do with our basic situation.

The women's movement is not **Vogue** magazine and we shouldn't want to make every woman talk and act and look like every other woman. We want to create the freedom to be as each of us truly wants to be. Women should have the freedom to wear bras or not as we individually want. We should defend each other's free choices, but we should not pressure each other into small conformities, either with how society thinks we should talk or dress or look, or how subcultures think we should appear: styles often come and go in the movement itself.

Class or ethnic differences can create static. Some women are more emotional, louder, less inhibited in feelings and choice of words and expression. Other women may experience those women as "violent" emotionally. More expressive women in turn may feel the group is trying to make them act more middle class, more traditionally feminine. Most of us are trained to judge all behavior from a middle-class perspective and anything that deviates from that we condemn without even thinking about it. Women who easily get angry and shout may be punished by the rest of the group, who might, if we thought about it, sometimes like to do something with our anger besides turn it into depression or brooding.

We are not, as we have been repeatedly told — with words, gestures, actions, advertisements, pictures, movies, signs — living in order to be acted upon. If we disagree with something in our group, we need to say so. The worst that can happen is that another woman will disagree,

perhaps with anger. This does not mean we will be thrown out of the group. Disagreements can be the beginning of fruitful discussion.

Quiet women may trouble others too. Other members may feel that women who don't speak don't like what is happening. Quiet women may make more verbal women feel uncomfortable or fear they are talking too much. We should try to find out why some of us do not talk. If it turns out that someone really has nothing to say at the time or wants to listen, fine. But perhaps the more verbal women have not been encouraging, and have left the quiet women out of discussions. The only way to find out what someone is feeling is to ask. We don't want to coerce each other into talking or not talking. We want to make each other feel comfortable contributing. At the same time, a few women cannot and should not keep the group going. If this is happening, we should discuss it.

Some topics create anxiety. If we sense the woman who is distressed wants to talk more and is waiting for help, we should give that help. But we should not coerce each other. If someone is pushed into talking about a topic before she is ready, the chances of ever getting to talk openly about it in a manner useful to her and to everyone else are lessened. Our small groups are places where we can learn to feel what we have to say and give is worth something, and therefore, so are we.

## **RELATING TO OTHER GROUPS**

We are all part of the women's liberation, or feminist, movement. That's us and a whole lot of other women all over this country and across the world. There are a few formal membership organizations, but most consciousness-raising groups and project groups relate through some umbrella organization in their area.

The umbrella organization of the women who wrote this booklet is Cape Cod Women's Liberation, consisting of consciousness-raising groups and project groups. We all meet several times a year to exchange information and launch new projects and recruit for old ones and encourage each other. Perhaps you received this pamphlet from an organization

in your area, or perhaps you may be starting in a new area — the situation we were in two years ago.

Sometimes our consciousness-raising group may decide to work on a project or action together, and sometimes we may want to work with other women. We can create new institutions to serve our needs: day care centers, women's centers, co-operatives, women's houses; and meaningful work — work that we feel good about, that has some relevance in our lives. We can force changes in the policies of hospitals, newspapers, libraries, businesses and schools. We need to meet with each other to share our ideas, get support and productive criticism on our projects.

It will take time before some of us are comfortable acting politically, while others of us will want to start today. Not all women will want to work in the women's movement. We should encourage each other to live, work and act in our own best interests.

Still, consciousness-raising groups are intended to be more than discussion groups, for in order to be a movement for change we have to act as well as talk. What is the satisfaction in raising our consciousness if that is only to increase our awareness of an oppressive society and an intolerable living situation? The more we look at our lives oftentimes the angrier we get. But when we begin to make changes around us, we can use that anger as energy to tear down and to build. We can find solidarity with each other, we can find friendship, closeness, and we can have the pleasure of reaching out to other women and bringing them into new groups and new projects where we can help each other to grow.

The more of us there are, the stronger we are. The more of us there are, the more we can change what has hurt us and what will continue to hurt women of all ages, until change by change we have at last remade our world.

## Unlearning to not speak

Blizzards of paper  
in slow motion  
sift through her.  
In nightmares she suddenly remembers  
a class she signed up for  
but forgot to attend.  
Now it is too late.  
Now it is time for finals:  
losers will be shot.  
Phrases of men who lectured her  
drift and rustle in piles:  
why don't you speak up?  
why are you shouting?  
You have the wrong line,  
wrong answer, wrong face.  
They tell her she is womb-man,  
babymachine, mirror image, toy,  
earth mother and penis-poor,  
a dish of synthetic strawberry icecream  
rapidly melting.  
She grunts to a halt.  
She must learn again to speak  
starting with **I**  
starting with **We**  
starting as the infant does  
with her own true hunger  
and pleasure  
and rage.

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