

# WHAT IT MEANS WHEN THEY SAY "NO"



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**I**n social dancing, **we have a lot of hang-ups around "No."** We feel bad when we say it, and we feel even worse when we hear it. **It pokes at the well of hurt we have accumulated from every rejection,** and prods our insecurities.

We have different strategies for avoiding this devastation. **We pride ourselves on agreeing to every dance.** We teach our beginners that they should dance with

everyone. **We shame others as elitists** when they appear selective in their choice of partners. We avoid rejection by agonizing over when the right moment is to approach someone for a longed-for dance – not if they’re taking a break, not if they’ve just danced too many in a row, not if they are talking to a cute dancer, not if they’re queuing up a song...

Each scene has its own quirks, but they all have this **quivering fear of the dreaded “No.”** I went through all of these ideas as I was learning to dance, and had a pretty well-developed system for sidestepping a “No.” When I failed I often felt miserable, or resented the person...

– until a few years ago, when in the blues dance scene I started to hear about **“Safe Spaces(<http://capitalblues.org/safe-space-policy/>)”** and **“Consent Culture(<http://www.thefrisky.com/2012-03-22/the-soapbox-on-consent-culture/>)”**. While at first I assumed they were all about reporting sexual misconduct and protecting people from harassment, I soon realized **what they proposed included subtly radical concepts that have the potential to totally transform our social dancing culture.** These are huge topics that I won’t be unpacking in depth, but I encourage you to read further. Today I’ll be sharing two main ideas with you:

**1. You are always allowed to say “No.”**

2. Hearing “No” doesn’t have to be a big deal.

### **Part 1: Delivering the “No”**

This might seem strange at first, but let’s consider a few of the reasons you might not want to dance at any given point in time, starting with some reasons that have nothing to do with the person asking you:

- You want to say hello to some people you know
- You want to greet some new people
- You’re tired and want to sit down
- You’re thirsty; time to get some water
- You need to visit the restroom
- You’re hot and want to cool off



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- You're starting to get sweaty and want to dry out
- You want to change shirts
- You want to change shoes
- You don't like this style
- You hoped to dance this style with someone in particular
- This song brings up memories that make you want to dance with certain people
- This song brings up painful memories
- You want to talk to the DJ
- You want to thank the organizer
- You have a question for a teacher
- You want to talk to that cute dancer
- Your friend needs cheering up
- You had a hard day and want to dance with people that you are close to
- You have reached your limit for interactions with strangers for the day
- You just received some tough feedback and want to dance with people you are comfortable with
- You want to dance with people that you don't usually see

And then of course there are the occasional times when it IS about that person, at least in part:

- They are wearing perfume or cologne that will make it difficult for you to breathe
- They just ate something that you are allergic to
- They are really sweaty
- They have an inescapable odor
- They have previously hurt you on the dance floor
- They have previously behaved in a sexually inappropriate way
- Your friend is in love with them and you are steering clear

I'm sure we could think of a truckload more! I remember visiting a house party in DC and on the walls they had listed several possible reasons someone might turn down a

dance. The thing is, **we all experience these things**. Your feelings and needs are valid; **just be honest with the person asking you and say, "No, thank you."**

Now, when I say be honest, I don't mean you necessarily need to go into detail. If you really are just needing to grab a quick cup of water, and you intend to seek that person out for the following song, feel free to say so. But I think we all know how tricky it can be to find someone if the social is of a reasonable size. Even with the best intentions, we might leave someone feeling even more disappointed. And lying is even worse. Don't say "I'm sitting this one out," and then hit the floor with the next person who asks you.

You have to figure out where your comfort level is. I don't have a problem letting people know that my allergies would interfere with my enjoyment of a dance with them, but I am less likely to tell someone that they reek. In any case where you don't feel moved to provide a specific reason, stick to that simple "No, thank you."

## Part 2: Accepting the "No"

We have to let go of entitlement. **Showing up to a social dance does not give you the right to dance with every other person who came.** Regardless of your gender, sexual orientation, dance level, stylish dress, long-term commitment to the scene, or any other factor, you do not deserve to dance with any given person at any given time.



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Yes, I personally think that teachers should do their best to dance with their students, and everyone should try to make newcomers and beginner dancers welcome, and we shouldn't systematically exclude any one individual. However, that should come out of a desire to build the community, not a resigned obligation or fear of shaming.

Imagine if we could go to the social even when we're feeling a bit tired or blue, and not worry about being totally drained by the demands of others. Imagine if everyone felt safe on the dance floor, and wasn't trying to dance defensively to simultaneously ward off a partner's unfortunate actions AND the condemning eye of those who might see you refuse that dance.

**Imagine if every time we asked someone for a dance, or agreed to a dance, we knew that it was because both of us WANTED that dance.**



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So when someone says, "No, thank you," just take it in stride and ask someone else to dance. Don't take it personally, and don't badger someone for a reason. Keep in mind the numerous possible reasons that might be behind that "No."

### **A Note for my Kizomba Dancers**

I had the privilege of interviewing [Tania Mendonca](http://www.kizombacommunity.com/interviews/ladies-leadership-interviews-tania-mendonca/) (http://www.kizombacommunity.com/interviews/ladies-leadership-interviews-tania-mendonca/), a few months ago. We touched on this topic, and I want to share with you her perspective as an Angolan emigrant who danced as an adolescent in Portugal and who now teaches professionally in the UK and internationally: "You never have to say yes to a dance. **We don't have the concept of dancing with every single person in the club.** We don't have the idea, 'I'm out to go dancing.' We went out to socialize, to dress up, to see friends, AND to dance."

I don't know about you, but I like the sound of that!

*\*Note: Fighting my own preferences as a teacher of English, I have used the singular "they" to avoid inserting gender into these situations.*

