

# TRANSFORM YOUR PARTNER'S DANCE EXPERIENCE – GIVE THE GIFT OF AN AWESOME DANCE!



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It's the holiday season, a time when we are encouraged to be generous and charitable, and to demonstrate our affection by giving gifts.

Why not take this giving spirit to the dance floor?



When we're out social dancing, it's easy to get caught up in any number of concerns. We can be focused **inwards**, trying to improve our technique or remember a combination from class; we can be focused **outwards**, trying to put on an impressive display for those watching on the side; or we can have our minds **far away**, thinking about our daily issues.

Let me encourage you, whenever possible, to let all of that go and focus on giving your partner an awesome dance. After all, doesn't it feel amazing when someone gives YOU that level of engagement? Here are some simple tips to delighting any partner!

Let's start with a few things that are considered good dance etiquette. Sure, you should have learned these rules when you were a beginner, but it could be you've gotten a tad complacent and don't give them too much thought these days. I promise you, though, they really make a big difference to your partner's experience.



### 1. Make yourself presentable.

Maybe you don't have time to shower just before you head out to a dance, but even if you're coming straight over from work, you can take a few moments to freshen up. Pack an extra shirt or change of clothes and apply some deodorant. Having a toothbrush and toothpaste is a good idea even outside the dance world, but if you can't manage that, it's easy enough to buy a pack of gum en route! If you like to wear perfume or cologne, be careful not to overdo it – you'll be much closer to others on the dance floor than in a meeting. I know I'm not the only one who's been hit with watering eyes and a runny nose upon entering close embrace! Even better if you have the chance to go a little bit glam or dapper – putting that extra effort in to dress up is always a plus in my book.

### 2. Smile and greet your partner.

Sure, we came to the party to dance, but there's a reason we also call these gatherings "socials." It doesn't take much time to make your partner feel like you might have a slight interest in their wellbeing. Ask about their job, what they did or will do over the weekend, or even just how they feel about the weather. These small steps to building a rapport can even pay off into real friendship over time.



### 3. Invite your partner to dance.

An invitation can be verbal or nonverbal. Personally, I strongly prefer someone to use words, but **any kind of request** suits me better than a demand. "Shall we?" "Would you like to dance?" "May I have the pleasure?" "Could I have this dance?" Saying 3-5 words won't lose you much of the song, and it shows consideration for your partner's feelings, eliminating the annoyance of presumption. Thrusting a hand in someone's face or pulling them toward the dance floor is rarely a promising start. If it's just too loud for you to feel confident about being heard, or you want to avoid inserting yourself too abruptly into a conversation, look for eye contact and offer a welcoming gesture. If you're the one accepting a dance, **show how pleased** you are to be asked!

**Now let me offer a few ideas that will take your dance from nice to memorable!**



### 1. Make eye contact

Now, let's be clear – I'm not talking about nonstop eye contact, where you're just staring at your partner's face. That gets overly intense really fast! However, a total lack of eye contact is nearly as bad. No one likes to feel utterly ignored, and that certainly applies on the dance floor. It feels wonderful when your partner is engaged enough to look into your eyes every so often. Show that you are present with your partner and glad to dance with them.

### 2. Appreciate your partner's movement

Take a moment to check out what your partner is doing. If you're in an open position or in full breakaway, take a look at their lines or their footwork. Don't be so focused on doing your shine that you never catch a glimpse of theirs! In closed position, feel how they flow between steps and or how they feel the music. You can express your enjoyment with a delighted laugh, raised eyebrows, or a simple exclamation like, "Nice!" (Just make sure your tone isn't patronizing.) **It always gives a boost when someone appreciates what you're bringing to the dance.**



### 3. Adapt to your partner

In couple dancing, the idea is for you and your partner to create something **together**. Everyone has a unique height and body shape, different background and training, and varied preferences. In order to have an amazing dance, we need to make adjustments so that we can achieve excellent connection. Maybe you need to modify

your hold or the size of your steps because of a height difference. Perhaps you sense your partner is unaccustomed to a full close embrace and would loosen up if there were a bit of space between you. If you don't know each other, it might be wise to avoid full dips or overly flirtatious moves. Or at the very least, start small (for example, with a small lean or with a wink) and escalate only if your partner responds with confidence. If you're dancing with a beginner, then as a leader you might stick to moves that are easily followed; as a follow you might avoid throwing in any accents or styling that could confuse your leader. Certainly when both of you are comfortable, the dance you create will be much more enjoyable.



#### 4. Be inspired by your partner

Social dancing is often compared to having a conversation. In an enjoyable verbal interaction, each of you **listens and responds** to one another. If only one person talks, or one asks all the questions, it doesn't feel like a good conversation. Likewise, even with our established lead and follow roles, it's important for both partners to have a voice and to listen. If you're leading, it's easy to maneuver your follower so they have space to express what they hear in the music. In salsa you can release to breakaway, and echo and elaborate movements you see your follower do. In close embrace dances like tango or kizomba, you can open enough to allow for follower embellishment and take inspiration from the kind of shapes they create. If you're following, go beyond accepting your partner's led direction, speed, and weight changes. Consider the level of energy they are conveying, the size of their movements, or the emotion they are inhabiting. When you start to communicate with your partner on all these additional levels, it is a rare and valuable experience.

Of course, none of us can live up to doing all of these all the time. Sometimes we just can't do small talk. Sometimes we need to practice the material from class.

Sometimes we're too overwhelmed to focus on our partner. **The more we try to engage fully with our partners, though, the more often we can hope to give and receive the gift of an awesome dance.**

