

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU ARE UNCOMFORTABLE



Post Views 2,626

This is written for all of you who have ever felt uncomfortable because of someone coming on to you during a dance. If you've ever felt trapped by the duty to be polite or worried about the consequences of disengaging from a situation that was "only" discomfiting, you'll want to read on.

However, there will be descriptions of sexual harassment and mention of sexual assault. Please consider that before you continue.

A Reader's Question

After Richie's article "When Dancing Becomes Groping," Meagan in New Delhi left a [comment](http://socialdancecommunity.com/when-dancing-becomes-groping-time-to-clean-up-the-dance-scene/) posing the following question:

“I am wondering – when is it okay as a follow to leave a dance before its end? I’m an intermediate dancer and I know as a follow I had the shorter learning curve and want to help others learn, so I will gladly dance basics with someone. BUT... sometimes I accept a dance from a guy whose intention it seems is to flirt, talk and hold me close, usually off beat or hardly trying dance moves. In these dances, there is usually no feeling of connection and in my experiences, it is these dancers that try to ‘cop a feel.’”

I was inspired to respond to this question as it fits in with [a few articles](http://socialdancecommunity.com/tag/consent/) (<http://socialdancecommunity.com/tag/consent/>). I have written recently that look at how to make our dance scenes more welcoming, respectful, and positive about consent.

What’s the Problem?

As much resistance as we face confronting situations of clear trespasses of consent, it’s extremely difficult to address how to handle situations where there hasn’t been any behavior that clearly deserves condemnation.

So let’s be clear what we’re actually talking about here. This isn’t a question about not enjoying dancing with beginners or anyone who sticks to basics. It’s also not about turning down a dance with someone you know behaves inappropriately. Perhaps most important to clarify: this isn’t about whether you enjoy talking while dancing – although when I posed my own version of Meagan’s question on my social media, I quickly found out that an incredible number of people just hate all conversation on the dance floor.

Here we are considering how to deal with someone whose conversation focuses on physical compliments and/or attempts to maneuver you into making one-on-one plans, while they are holding you close and barely dancing. Yet they haven’t done anything that definitely crosses a line.

“What’s the big deal?” some of you are thinking. “So your partner is holding you a little closer than called for. So they’re trying to flirt with you. Lots of people come to the dance scene hoping to make new personal connections in that direction. And some people just enjoy flirting!”

Sure, any one of us can endure four minutes of such behavior and walk away at the end of the song without damage.

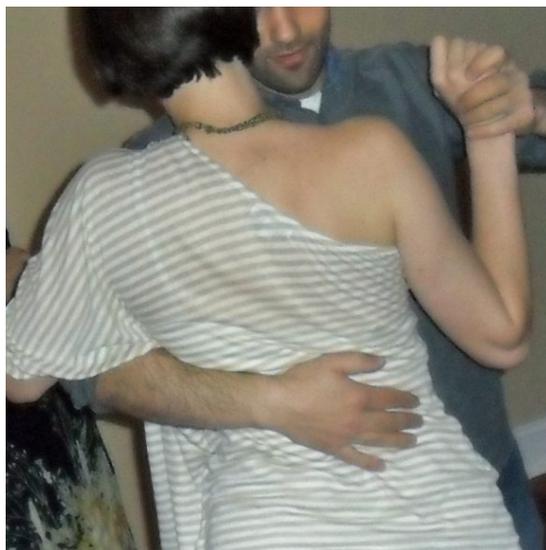
Except this is rarely an isolated experience.

It’s not four minutes once a month. It’s not even four minutes once a week.

For many of us, it happens every time we go out dancing. And if we're still open and willing to dance with everyone, it'll likely to happen more than once in a night.

On the Defensive

Think about walking through a large shopping mall. There are numerous vendors in kiosks in the middle of the hallways. There are salespeople trying to hand you a brochure, offer you a sample, and generally pull you in so they can sell you something. They stand in your path so you have to either engage with them or detour to avoid them.



Most of us are used to this sort of thing. But imagine that happening not just on the occasions you go to the mall, but every time you walked anywhere. How would it affect your way of moving through the world if every time you wanted to go somewhere, there were pushy salespeople trying to get something from you?

Let's bring that idea back to the dance floor. We've come out to dance, but don't really want to deal with the "sales pitch" coming from our dance partner. Not only that, this is the kind of behavior that very often leads to unwanted, inappropriate touching – "copping a feel," as Meagan put it.



I have personally experienced everything from caresses on my face, fingers massaging my lower back, pelvic grinding, kiss on my neck and deliberate hands on my breasts or the seat of my jeans, far more times than I could possibly count. And given how normal it is for my friends to complain of similar experiences, I know I'm not an isolated, unlucky case. Far too many have also shared stories of sexual

assault(<http://www.kizombacomunity.com/service-category/stories/>).

Unfortunately that mean I'm going to be quick to pick up on any signs that might indicate I'm headed towards sexual harassment. Regardless of whether the person is a predator or just someone who has never learned about respecting boundaries in the dance, I'm going to start dancing and speaking defensively. I may also choose to end the dance mid-song. I simply can't give everyone the benefit of the doubt, because that puts me at too much risk.

What to Do When It Becomes Uncomfortable

I wanted to see how other dancers feel about these kinds of situations. I asked for input on a few different corners of Facebook and received comments from Brazilian zouk, blues, lindy hop, kizomba, salsa and tango dancers. Thanks to people who were willing to share their words more publicly here, you'll get to read advice from a wide range of people.

I think it's worth saying up front that things will necessarily vary widely by scene. For example, tango communities don't generally encourage any talking on the floor, let alone pickup behavior. Kizomba has long been a close embrace dance, which can make the range of error for "holding too close" much more narrow. That's in addition to our own individual varying levels of comfort, both with people who are clearly after something other than an enjoyable dance, and with speaking up or taking action to assert boundaries.

Let's Talk

If someone is making you uncomfortable, the most certain way of getting back to a dance you can enjoy (or at least tolerate) is to talk about it.

Greg Avakian, an instructor of blues and WCS in Philly, offers the following suggestion for starting an honest conversation: "Look at your partner with a smile and ask 'Hey, um, are you trying to flirt with me?'"

"For one thing, it will tell you something about their character if you think they are answering honestly. It can also lead to fairly intellectual/unattached conversation about the dance scene, etiquette, and being kind and polite to each other.

"If yes, you can say 'Mmmmm ...maybe not such a good idea. Let's just dance instead.'"

"If no, 'Oh that's good. Ok, sorry; I wasn't sure.'"

What I love about this suggestion is it's very non-threatening and doesn't bring assumptions to the conversation. It's possible to move on gracefully after that. Plus, as Greg points out: "If this person is secure and has a sense of humor, you guys can laugh about it during future events."



The Direct Approach

However, sometimes the person's intent is entirely too clear. Cory Davis from Seattle won't stand for unwanted come-ons; she'd rather "remove their hands from my body

and tell them they're being inappropriate and that they need to learn to actually dance if they want to fit in. I'd probably tell an organizer about it too. But I understand why not everyone feels comfortable being that direct."

Nathan from Seattle shares: "Every time this happened to me, it was accompanied by them being equally persistent in physically pressing/connecting against/to me. I



became very accustomed to saying 'I hate saying this to such an attractive young lady, but this works better if you don't shove your hips up against me. I'm here to dance and I need space to move.'

"If I had to push them back off me 3 times in one song, I would generally tell them I was walking off the floor if they did it again. If this became a recurring issue, I would sometimes look them in the eye when they asked me to dance and straight up ask 'Are you going to keep your hips off me and respect my space?' That generally finally got the message through. They either respected me better or stopped asking me to dance."

It can definitely take a while to overcome our sense of obligation to finish a dance, so I like this comment from Ashley in DC: "I used to be 'polite,' finish up the dance and refuse to accept other dances. Now I tell them they're making me uncomfortable and end the dance in the middle though because I'm so done with that."

What Will You Do?

Trying to talk with the dancer in question in these kinds of situations can admittedly contribute to your feeling even more uncomfortable. You have to evaluate for yourself if you feel safe confronting them, especially if your scene hasn't paid much attention to these kinds of issues. Sometimes the cost-benefit analysis might tell you to endure until the end of the song. In other situations the best option is indeed to end the dance early and walk away.

Since this article has already gone long, I invite you to come back next month for more ideas on how to respond when your dance partner is making you uncomfortable. We'll look at a variety of subtler options, both verbal and physical, that enable you to mitigate or even escape your discomfort while avoiding confrontation.

In the meantime, share your own experiences and advice with us in the comments!

Thanks also to David Hendershot for invaluable advice on my writing and consenting to my using his image out of context.
