

# DEFENSIVE DANCING: HANDLING UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS



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**W**hat are your options when you feel uncomfortable in the middle of a dance? What can you do when someone is just trying to flirt with you, rather than actually dance? Is it okay to leave a dance before the end of the song if they haven't actually touched you inappropriately (yet)?

Whether you're leading or following, unpleasant situations can come up that make you feel trapped. Plenty of us are so thoroughly conditioned not to make a scene that we feel we can't do anything but endure to the end of the dance.

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to respond to an uncomfortable situation without confronting the person head on. In this follow-up to [last month's tips](http://socialdancecommunity.com/when-uncomfortable/)(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/when-uncomfortable/>), we'll look at some less direct ways to alleviate your discomfort.

## Subtle Verbal Cues

“So, where do you live? Are you here every week? Do you have a boy/girlfriend? You’re so good looking. I love the way you move. Do you meet a lot of guys/girls dancing? How about we get a drink together sometime?”

One route is to choose the shortest possible answers to their questions. It’s hard to carry on a flirtation with only one-word responses, and curtness is usually perceived as lack of interest or even annoyance.

Another approach I sometimes use is turning the conversation around by asking a question that invites them to talk extensively about themselves, hopefully bringing us closer to the end of the dance. I try to choose something completely non-cuddly, maybe even something out of a job interview: “What’s the most difficult situation you had to face at work in the last month?” or “What books have you read recently?”

Perhaps my favorite idea comes from Anna-Grace in Denver: “Out awkward them. If they say I smell nice, I get all into talking about this new deodorant I found and make it a whole big topic.”

It takes a special kind of dedication to turn talk of deodorant back to flirtation!

John in Durham gives us another good idea for derailing the conversation: “Numerous questions are social code for ‘I am interested in you’; ‘Let me tell you about my significant other’ is social code for ‘I am not interested in you.’”

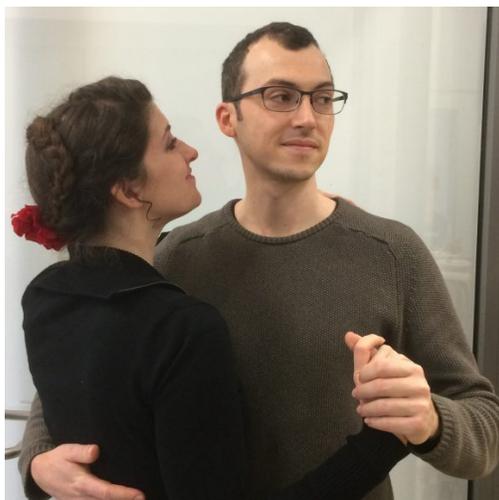
## Defensive Dancing

There’s also plenty of options for asserting your boundaries that don’t involve speaking.

No matter which role you dance, avoiding eye contact completely indicates deliberate disinterest or discomfort; either way, a good message to send if you’d like someone to stop hitting on you.

Strengthening your frame will both communicate tension and help you keep your distance. Tighten the muscles in your back and arms and increase the pressure





against your partner's hand.

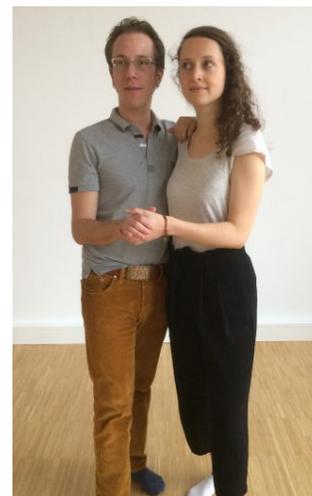
If you're leading, you can choose moves that take your follower away from you. For a lot of dances, that's as simple as introducing a turn. For close embrace dances, opening into a promenade position is the best way to give yourself more space.

You can then continue to lead

and move in a way that requires a more open position, whether through turning figures, breakaway, or pivoting moves that keep your follower too busy to hold you close.

I have a "defensive dancing" mode for following. For dances like salsa or swing, I put my left hand on the front of my leader's arm and I push away. I then "maintain my bubble" by keeping pressure from both my hands and looking for connection only in the hand on my back.

Creating more distance also makes it difficult for my partner to have their hand too low!



For close embrace dances like kizomba I start by putting my forearm(s) on my partner's clavicle so that I can push away to create a bit of distance. I also keep my pelvis tipped away so that there can be no easy transition to grinding.

(Incidentally, all these techniques are great ways of communicating that you want to maintain more space, even outside the specific situation of a partner giving you

unwanted flirtatious attention.)

Jake in Baltimore gives this hopeful advice, "Pull away from close embrace/close connection and focus on your own dance more than the questions you're being asked. Your partner might get the hint, or they might really appreciate your dance and want to join in."

### Walking Away Gracefully

It's completely fine to end a dance in the middle if you feel uncomfortable. You don't have to wait for a particular line of impropriety to be crossed. You're not collecting evidence to prove you were justified in walking away.

Once you've made that decision, though, it can still feel very awkward to terminate your interaction. While many dancers shared last month(<http://socialdancecommunity.com/when-uncomfortable/>), that they tell their partner why they are ending the dance, that can be an intimidating step to take.

One tried-and-true alternative is to stop moving, say "thank you," and walk off the floor. Sure, you're not really thankful for that dance, but it provides a little social lubricant.

Another simple approach I encourage you to try is to stop dancing, say "I have to" while turning away and then walk off the floor without finishing the sentence. You don't owe them an explanation. They'll probably fill in the blank for themselves.

If you truly dread that moment when you've stopped dancing and they're still holding you and looking at you for an explanation, there's another possibility. First, initiate a turn; followers can either roll clockwise off the leader's right arm or lift your own left hand to create a window (an escape hatch, if you will). Then pat your partner's shoulder or squeeze their hand, let go, and walk away.



### Scene Considerations

In spite of the previous negative experiences we carry with us, I think it can be helpful to try to remember the person we are dancing with is a complex human being who might not mean any harm by their actions. Some people are players, some are even predators, but a lot of the ones who make us uncomfortable do so unintentionally.

That means using a direct conversational approach could lead to a useful teaching moment. We can let those partners know that what they're doing isn't okay for us (and therefore may not be all right for others) with such simple statements as:

"I don't want to discuss my personal life."

"I'm not comfortable with these questions."

“I would prefer not being held so close.”

“Let’s dance in a more open position, please.”

Jay Byrd, a lindy hopper in Wisconsin, offers this perspective: “I think some are optimists as well, or even willfully ignore signs, and take even curt responses as signs of encouragement. I get wanting to take the focus off of dancing to relieve pressure for themselves, but at a certain point, my compassion ends. I simply don’t have time or patience to make this discernment between socially awkward and socially exploitative anymore.”



Organizers and teachers can make this easier for all of us by setting expectations for what’s normal or acceptable in the dance scene.

[Sarah Lind](#)

[Temmer](https://www.facebook.com/sarah.temmer) (<https://www.facebook.com/sarah.temmer>), in NYC remembers, “There was a dance I used to go to in Colorado that went over stuff like that before the dance started. They’d say things like, ‘We’re here to dance, and we recognize that we’re also meeting new people and that’s exciting, but if you think someone is cute ask them if they’d like to get a drink/food/chat nearby! Please keep it off the dance floor.’

“There was also some framing around how that makes the dance more accessible to everyone by ensuring that it’s a [safer space](http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/) (<http://www.kizombacommunity.com/services/consent-safety/>).”

These measures can help dancers who are new to the scene avoid causing uncomfortable situations. That in turn makes it easier to recognize the people who are more interested in hooking up than having respectful, enjoyable dances.

## Our Responsibility

As much as it might help our scene to try to view these uncomfortable moments as teaching opportunities, it’s also entirely fair to ask yourself whether you have enough energy to attempt to educate your dance partner about respecting boundaries. Their next partner might have cause to thank you, but it’s okay to decide not to take that on.

There's nothing wrong with just redirecting the conversation or dancing defensively. It's also fine to smile stiffly, pretend you're fine, and wait the song out.

But we should also know we have a right to protest or walk away.

"I don't think there's any one right answer," says a lindy hopper and blues dancer from Montreal.

"You can just ignore it even though it makes you uncomfortable. You can try to politely hint or change the flow of things. You can flat out stop or tell him he's bothering you. All of these choices are legit for various reasons."

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