

## Dance Etiquette – Part 4



### *Dance Partners*

We already know about not monopolizing a partner. Dance etiquette has ruled that no more than two consecutive songs be danced with the same partner, so that everyone can find a diversity of partners to dance with. To do this is not only fair, it is smart: you will get to dance with everyone and improve the prospects of your social dancing.

Dancing with a wide set of partners is a cornerstone of social dancing. This general principle applies to everyone, including dancers who are romantically involved. A romantic pair that dances only with one another undermines the structure of social dancing by refusing to contribute to it.

Romantic couples who refuse to dance with others often act out of fear and inhibition: fear of damaging the romance by dancing with someone else, or feelings of insecurity when their sweetheart is dancing with someone else. These negative emotions are unfounded, and arise from completely invalid notions of social dancing. Requesting or accepting a dance carries no commitment outside of the duration of a song, typically 3-5 minutes. Think of it as a brief chat with someone in a cocktail party, before moving on to the next conversation. Going to a dance and declining to dance with everyone is as boring and pointless as going to a party and not speaking to anyone.

A great way to increase one's circle of dance acquaintances is to ask beginners to dance. I still fondly remember the advanced dancers who with some degree of regularity asked me to dance when I was a novice. Dancing with beginners is not only an excellent way to develop your lead/follow, but also is a great human investment that will

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pay off handsomely, because novice dancers don't remain that way for long. Don't think of dancing with a novice as charity, you are doing yourself a favor.

On the other hand, be judicious about asking those more skillful than you. If everyone was constantly seeking dance partners better than themselves, virtually no dancing would take place. Dancers are nice, so the skillful partners that you seek may not decline at first, but if you continue to hunt them down, they will start avoiding you. My rule of thumb is: the frequency of asking someone to dance is inversely proportional with their level of dancing. If someone is far more skilled than you, then ask them only sparingly (of course feel free to accept whenever they ask you, which could be often). If someone is equally or less skilled than you, ask them more often. How do you get dancers, especially better dancers, to dance with you? Just be a considerate, warm, fun-loving partner, and keep improving your dancing.

Finally, on the subject of regular dance partners: whether or not to have a regular partner depends on many factors. The obvious advantage of a dance partnership is having someone to take classes and practice with, or to go out dancing with, especially to places not frequented by dancers. However, dance partnerships present unique challenges, and may complicate other parts of your life. A dance partnership is a very special kind of relationship, with a delicate balance, whose maintenance is highly nontrivial. The interaction of dance partnerships with your personal and romantic life is especially something to be carefully considered.

There are many arguments both in favor and against regular dance partnerships; the validity of each of these arguments varies greatly according to the personalities involved. Like any other relationship, a dance partnership requires care, consideration, and expenditure of time and effort. Before getting into a partnership, make sure you are willing to make the personal investment necessary to make it a success.

It is worth noting that one has no claim on the regular dance partner during a social dance. In a social dance, everyone dances with everyone, with the exception of the first and last dance of the evening, which can be reserved.

### *The Dance Community*

Shortly after starting to dance, you will have come across most of the ``regulars'' who make up the backbone of the local dance community. Dance communities are fairly small. The dance community is like a family, and its members are like family members. Friendships come and go over time, but family is there forever. That is why maintenance of relationships within a family is critical: few of us ever choose new parents or siblings. Once a relationship within a family has soured, its effects are long-lasting and painful. In the same vein, it pays to maintain good relationships in the dance community, because as long as you go dancing in the same geographical area, you will run into the same people over and over again, and awkward situations will remain, well, awkward.

Avoiding unpleasant situations is easy, especially because most dancers are easygoing, nice people. Just don't go out of your way to aggravate anyone. Easily done, because there is so much dancing going on, there is hardly time for anything else. All one has to do is to observe elementary social graces. Despite this, there are a few situations where dancers are prone to get in trouble.

One of these sticky situations involves dance etiquette. Everyone seems to agree to dance etiquette in abstract, but there is a wide variation in what individuals believe applies to them in practice. When you see someone who is, in your opinion, in violation of dance etiquette, it may be awfully tempting to go and give the offender a piece of your mind. Or at least, to try and politely point out the mistake. Don't give in to that temptation!

It is very difficult, in fact next to impossible, to change people. Few of us have that magical combination of tact, insight, and charisma to be able to change someone's behavior in a meaningful way. You are likely to generate resentment without accomplishing anything. Furthermore, you will look a silly busybody to onlookers. The exception is the case of a close friend, whom you feel obligated to help out. In that case, any related conversation had better take place tactfully and in private. But in general: Etiquette, yes. Etiquette police, no!

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Does this mean that etiquette offenders go scot free? Not really. Etiquette has a wonderful self-enforcing mechanism. Consistent violators will find themselves more and more isolated, and thus problems usually take care of themselves.

In some cases more direct action may be needed, especially when the violator puts others in serious immediate discomfort or danger. Action should then come not from the average dancer, but from someone official, for example the emcee or DJ. In that case it is very important that the rules are stated unambiguously and enforced uniformly. Your job, however, is finished once you bring a violation to the attention of emcee or DJ.

It is also a good idea to avoid old, tired, and irresolvable arguments, dance-related or otherwise. For example, there is nothing original left to be said (if there ever was any) about the superiority or inferiority of International vs. American style, Swing vs. Jive, Country Western vs. Swing vs. Ballroom, and so on. More often than not, these are questions of taste, people have made up their minds, and will not be swayed by anything that you have to say. Enjoy the dance and the company of your dancing friends; don't put them down.

A phenomenon one sometimes sees in social dancing is dance cliques, groups of individuals that only dance among themselves, and implicitly or explicitly discourage others from dancing with them. There is very little you can do if you come across them. But if you are part of them: do yourself a favor, lighten up!

### *Dancing and Romance*

Dancing by its nature is a romantic activity. It involves music, and the close proximity of (usually) the opposite sex. For most of us, this is part of the attraction of dancing. Where else is the opportunity of having an attractive stranger in your arms within a few seconds of meeting them? However, the connection of dancing and romance can unfortunately also lead to misunderstanding and unhappiness.

Much of this unhappiness can be avoided by awareness of the basic premises of social dancing. Social dancing is exactly that, *social*. Once again I will use the metaphor of a cocktail party: a dance is like a brief chat in a cocktail party, after which one moves on to the next conversation. Each of these conversations may in turn be funny, heated, professional, elegant, or provocative. Nevertheless, they are nothing but brief conversations, enjoyable at the moment, but certainly not signifying or requiring a long-term interaction.

The same principle applies to social dancing: Each dance is a brief, and hopefully enjoyable, social encounter. Newcomers to dancing sometimes have a hard time understanding this, but to ask or accept a dance does not necessarily indicate a personal interest, even though the dance itself might look passionate or provocative.

**Dancing is about fun and fantasy and make-believe.** It often involves imagination and the telling of a story: the majesty of Waltz, sensuality of Tango, aristocratic nobility of International Foxtrot, or the irreverent fun attitude of Swing. A particular dance may look alternatively elegant, provocative, strong, or sexy, but it is only a role-playing game. Correspondingly, a social dance event is a safe haven where one can play these games and have a degree of uninhibited fun, with the understanding that our actions on the dance floor, especially during a dance, are not to be interpreted according to the more serious (and conservative) standards of the outside world.

The common understanding of the dance community makes this level of fun possible; it has been agreed that we come together, enjoy our dancing, and that our dancing activities have no implications beyond the dancing itself. To read more into what happens on the dance floor would be a mistake.

Two facets of this mistake that can be particularly hurtful: The first is to misread the attention and mannerisms of a partner, during dancing, as genuine romantic interest. While romances do develop in the dancing community (as anywhere else), be careful about making any assumptions. You will save yourself from an awkward moment, or worse, endangering your dancing friendships.

The second facet of this problem involves romantic partners that both dance. The key to their dancing and romantic happiness is, once again, that dancing is merely role-playing, and that what happens on the dance floor is

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not for real. Each of them should feel free to dance with other members of the dance community. Realizing this, they can spare themselves much pain and anguish, and build a stronger relationship.

Despite the fact that much of dancing is fantasy and make-believe, and that many dancers keep their romantic and dancing lives separate, there is nothing against looking for romance in the dancing circles. If that is your purpose, best of luck! Don't forget to learn dancing and have fun along the way.

### *Looking Inside*

When all is said and done, your happiness in social dancing depends more on you than anyone else. If you are determined to have a good time, and have a good attitude, you have a good chance of enjoying your dancing experience.

The first ingredient of a good attitude is a sense of humor. Take all that comes to you in stride. If you are not asked for dances, or are turned down a few times, don't be bothered. If a particular dance does not go well, if you misstep in a pattern or two, let it pass. You can do no better than your best. Be nice to other dancers, continue to improve your dancing, and you will have a progressively more enjoyable dancing experience.

Dancers are in general a likeable bunch. But in dancing, as elsewhere, you will come across all types. Sooner or later, someone may rub you the wrong way, or even worse, be directly obnoxious to you. You may see gigantic egos, unsightly ambitions, and plain unkindness. Especially if you are a novice dancer, these circumstances can be frustratingly difficult to deal with. Thankfully these situations are rare, but at such times it is especially important to look inside and draw on your strength of character.

The key to enjoyment in dancing is awareness of your goal: to enjoy dancing. Enjoyment is contagious and cumulative. People like to be around individuals who enjoy themselves. Be one of those individuals. Be determined not to let small things spoil your evening of dancing.

To enjoy dancing, you must enjoy the music. If you are not already a musical person, develop an understanding and appreciation of the music. It will also help your understanding of the dance.

Active, outgoing personalities have an advantage in social dancing. Even if you are not naturally that way, try and cultivate a pro-active approach to your dancing. If you like a song and want to dance, if you like a partner and want to dance with him/her, don't hesitate to go and ask. Make friends in the dancing community. You would be surprised how much an occasional smile and salutation can do. There are virtually hundreds of individuals out there waiting to be friends with you. All it takes is a minimum level of effort from you.

Ultimately no-one and nothing can make you happy or unhappy. Only *you* can make you happy. Dancing can help.

### SUMMARY

- Smile.
- Etiquette is here to ensure everyone has a good time in a social dance setting, so pay attention to it.
- Ask everyone to dance. Do not monopolize one partner for the whole night.
- Do not decline a dance unless you absolutely have to. Having declined a dance, you cannot dance the same song with someone else.
- Thank your partner after each dance.
- It is polite to clap for live performers when they finish a song and for DJs when they finish their set. If you are not dancing, it is also considered polite to clap after a lengthy solo; however this is not expected of active dancers.
- Avoid patterns that your partner cannot do: dance to the level of your partner.

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- It is not necessary to apologize to your partner if a particular move is not executed perfectly. The point is not to have a perfect dance, but to have fun. However, if your mistake may have physically hurt your partner, please apologize and make sure they are okay.
- Be considerate of other couples on the floor. Exercise good floor craft. Do not cut other couples off. No aerials or choreographed steps on the social dance floor!
- Dancing is good exercise so be prepared to sweat! Many people bring extra shirts to change over the course of an evening. Other tips include bringing a towel or handkerchief to the dances or using baby powder.

### Sources:

<http://www.utdallas.edu/~aria/dance/etiquette.html>  
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