

# Social Dancing Etiquette<sup>1</sup>

Dance etiquette is a set of guidelines that help us navigate the social dimensions of dancing.

Why do we care about dance etiquette? Because it is nice to know how to go about in the dancing circles. It makes the difference between having a happy or unhappy dancing experience, the difference between people wanting, or not wanting to dance with you.

## Comfort and Safety

Wear clothing that makes it easy and enjoyable to dance, both for yourself and your partner.

- Regardless of how informal the dance is, always wear dance shoes. Do not wear sneakers or other shoes with rubber or spongy soles. They can stick to the floor during turns and spins and cause ankle and knee injuries.
- Avoid sleeveless shirts and strapped dresses, especially for active dancing: It is not pleasant to have to touch the damp skin of a partner.
- Sleeves that are baggy or cut low in the armpit are not a good idea, especially in Latin and swing dancing, because dancers need access to partner's back, and hands may get caught in baggy sleeves.
- Accessories like big rings, watches, brooches, loose/long necklaces, and big belt buckles can be dangerous. They can catch in partner's clothing, scratch and bruise.
- Gentlemen: if you have no place to leave your keys and loose change, carry them in the \*left\* pocket of your trousers. This makes it less likely to bruise your partner.
- Long hair should be put up or tied in a ponytail. It is difficult to get into closed dance position when the lady has long flowing hair (hair gets caught in gentleman's right hand). It is also not fun to be hit in the face with flying hair during turns and spins.

## Asking for a Dance

When asking for a dance, it is easiest to stay with traditional phrases:

- "May I have this dance?"
- "May I have this Waltz/Rumba/Foxtrot/etc."
- "Would you like to dance?"
- "Care to dance?"
- "Shall we dance?"

In the past it has been the tradition that men asked women to dance. But this custom has gradually changed. Today, women should feel equally comfortable asking a partner for a dance, even in a formal setting.

If your desired partner is with a group, be unambiguous and make eye contact when asking for a dance. If you vaguely approach a group, two individuals may think you are asking for a dance. You can imagine that the one not getting the dance is going to be miffed. Let's avoid such awkward moments by a decisive approach and solid eye contact.

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What if you want to ask someone to dance, who is engaged at the moment in a conversation? Is it acceptable to interrupt a conversation to ask someone to dance?

Ask someone to dance if you think he/she is ready to dance and will enjoy dancing with you at that moment. This requires you to be a good judge of the moment. Also, if you know someone well enough to know they don't mind being interrupted, then go ahead and ask them.

Perhaps one way to handle this is to walk gently to the edge of your intended partner's "personal space", which is about 3-4 feet (one meter). It will give you an opportunity to ask them to dance. If your presence is not acknowledged, then it may be a good idea to find someone else for that dance.

Exercising common sense and social skills is always a good idea. If someone is sitting closely with their significant other, whispering sweet nothings to each other, then it is probably not a good time to ask either of them for a dance. Now a different scenario: your intended partner is cornered by a bore and being lectured on weather patterns in lower Namibia. You can advance and stand close. Once your intended partner makes eye contact with you, smile and say: "Dance?" Usually, that is enough to do the job. If not, it is better to leave him/her to learn about weather patterns in lower Namibia.

Sometimes two individuals simultaneously ask someone for a dance. In that situation, dance etiquette recommends that the object of attention should accept one of the dances, while offering a later dance to the other one.

## Who to Ask

If each person dances with only one or two others, the social dynamics of dancing will be compromised. For that reason, dance etiquette strongly encourages everyone to dance with many different partners. This is to ensure a diversity of partnerships on the floor, and to give everyone a chance to dance.

People generally tend to dance with others at their own level, but you should try to dance socially with partners of all levels. Dance etiquette frowns disapprovingly on those who only dance with the best dancers on the floor. Although this is not a terrible offense, it is still bad form. Better dancers are especially advised to ask beginners to dance. Not only does this help the social dynamics of a dance, it also helps the better dancer.

Unfortunately, there are some social dancers who consider themselves too good to dance with beginners, who cannot "keep up" with their level of dancing. It is often the case that these dancers are not as good as they think. They need good partners because only good partners can compensate for their mistakes, bad technique, or other inadequacies. The truly good dancers often seek the challenge of dancing with those at lower levels and enjoy it. Good dancers make their partners look good.

## Declining a Dance

Being declined is always unpleasant. For beginners and shy individuals, it is even harder to take, and may discourage them from social dancing. Dance etiquette requires that one should avoid declining a dance under most circumstances. For example, there is no correct way of refusing an invitation on the basis of preferring to dance with someone else. According to tradition, the only graceful way of declining a dance is either (a) you do not know the dance, (b) you need to take a rest, or (c) you have promised the dance to someone else.

If someone is trying to monopolize you on the dance floor, making inappropriate advances, is unsafe (e.g. collides with others on the floor), or is in other ways unsavory, you are within the bounds of etiquette to politely

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but firmly decline any more dances. Perhaps the simplest, best way is to say "No, thank you," without further explanation or argument. Dancers are encouraged to use discretion and restraint when exercising this option.

## Being Declined

The first thing to do when one is turned down for a dance is to take the excuse at face value. Typical social dance sessions can be as long as three to four hours, and there are few dancers who have the stamina of dancing non-stop. Everyone has to take a break once in a while, and that means possibly turning down one or two people each time one takes a break. The advice to shy dancers and especially beginners is not to get discouraged if they are turned down once or twice.

However, since social dancers are generally nice and polite, being repeatedly declined can be a signal. In that case, it is a good idea to examine one's dancing and social interactions to see if anything is wrong.

## Sharing the Floor

Responsible usage of the floor requires that one stays out of the way of others. Some figures require a momentary movement against line of dance. These figures should be executed with great caution on a social dance floor, and only when there is no danger of collision. Avoid getting too close to other couples, especially less experienced ones. Be prepared to change the directions of your patterns to avoid congested areas. This requires thinking ahead and matching your patterns to the free areas on the floor (floor craft). While this may sound complicated to the novice dancer, it gradually becomes second nature. Another aspect of sharing the floor is to match one's speed to that of others.

## Aerials and Choreography

The only thing to be said about aerials on the social dance floor is don't do them. While they may look "cool," the execution of aerials requires training by a qualified instructor. Don't do them by yourself unless you are trained, and certainly don't do them on the social dance floor. Dancers have been badly hurt by either participating in aerials, or unluckily being in the proximity of those who did. In fact, in 1996, a swing dancer [died](#) during the execution of an aerial. Aerials can be extremely dangerous, please take this issue seriously.

The same principle applies to other lifts and drops, as well as choreographed patterns that require a large amount of floor space.

<sup>1</sup>Information copied from [Elements of Dance Etiquette](#), Aria Nosratinia, accessed October 28, 2019.