

Beginner Tip Sheet

Welcome Contact Dance Improvisation Newcomer

Here are some tips to help you with your first dance jams or classes.

Acclimatization period. Please expect that there will be an acclimatization period while you get to know what contact improvisation is and the jamming culture, we practice it in. It can be a very different way of relating than you may be used to.

In this helpful tip sheet, we will not be repeating things in RDD guidelines. So make sure you read the [RDD Dance Jam Guidelines](#) before coming to an RDD jam.

What is going on, on the dance floor?

The RDD Dance Jams are a place to practice classical contact improvisation. Explorations of different themes such as intimacy, sensuality, surrendering control, anger, fighting, being contained, grief, etc. are welcome as long as they are acted out through the form of contact dance improvisation, are not explicitly sexual, and are created through a step-by-step verbal or non-verbal consent building process.

Please note that a newcomer to contact dance improvisation may not yet have acquired the language or skill through which to build consent for dances exploring intense themes. Therefore, we ask you to assess your ability to navigate intense themes and hold back on these types of exploration if you feel you do not yet have the skill, knowledge, practice, and vocabulary (verbal and non-verbal) to navigate intense dances.

As a newcomer to CI, you may experience some of the following while you acclimatize yourself to jam culture:

Altered states:

- **oxytocin and endorphin high (snuggling brain chemical high)** can occur as a result of the level of touch involved in the form.
- **emotions can be triggered** due to touch and the relational aspects of CI. These can be a feeling of love for others and the world, grief, and emotions related to past trauma.
- **disorientation and even nausea due to rolling around, being upside down** (vestibular input)
- **nervous System overwhelm.** As a newcomer, the new experience or CI may cause a nervous-system-overwhelm. If this occurs take time to ground yourself and breathe out with slow and easeful exhales. The side of the studio is a great place to lie down and feel the floor.
- **inability or confusion in organizing or placing experience.** There may not yet be a psychological box or category in your psyche to place your CI experiences in, and this can be disorientating or confusing. Without a psychological “box” to organize their CI experiences newcomers may organize their CI experiences using the psychological “box” they come in with. These tend to be “touch means sex” or “feeling of heart-opening means I am in love with the person I just danced with”. Over time we suggest you created a new CI psychological category through which to understand and place your CI dances. This category can involve a range of platonic-touch, heart opening as a feeling not necessarily attached to another, a place to play in the unknown to make discoveries about self, and a relational research project.

These altered states usually resolve themselves as you get more used to contact improvisation. As with any altered state, care is needed. Make sure to ground yourself before heading home. Talk to friends, seek professional help, or speak to the jam facilitator if you are feeling overwhelmed.

You may also experience this phenomenon:

- **Associations that touch lead to sex.** If the only touch in your adult life has been romantic touch, you may associate touch with sex. It can take time to acclimatize yourself to the range of sensual-to-platonic touch that occurs at a jam that is not sexual. Therefore in your first few weeks of jamming, you might be easily lead, or even lead your partners, into dances that have sexualized energy. It is important that you know that this might happen. If it does, just end the dance and take some downtime. This association will usually resolve itself over time.
- **Reflexive actions might make it easy to lift you.** We all have a startle reflex that involves a quick arching and stiffening of the back. This is seen in how a person's back "jumps" if you pop a balloon unannounced behind their back. A newcomer's nervous system might be on high alert due to all the new sensations they are having. When someone moves to take them into an over-the-shoulder lift, they may startle. The jerk back of their head and the fact that their body stiffens can make them very easy to lift. Learning to "wet-noodle" (make yourself floppy) will make you impossible to lift. You can also always move to verbal feedback as well. Also, tell people you are new to CI prior to a dance and then they will know not to lift you.
- **Power imbalance** can occur between the newcomer and more senior dancers. It is a well-understood phenomenon that when romantic relationships occur within a power imbalance, there is a risk that the person with less power may feel a reduced ability to enforce boundaries. The lines that separate what is okay from what is not okay can become blurry. For these reasons, relationships with power imbalances have a higher risk of hurt and abuse. In the contact improvisation communities, I have seen this phenomenon occur not just within romantic relationships but within dances or between students and teachers.

If someone tries to take advantage of your beginner status, please speak with to the jam facilitator. This newcomer/more experienced dancer power imbalance usually resolves itself as you acclimatize yourself to the form and jam culture.

As a newcomer:

- You can spend time just watching the jam.
- Tell your dance partners you are new to contact improvisation and/or jamming.
- Practice being comfortable falling and rolling on the floor.
- Do not explore intense themes in dances until you settle in the form and community and have built up boundary-setting skills
- You can request that your partner not lift you and/or not bear weight upon you.
- Practice ending a dance.
- Practice saying no to a dance.
- Take some contact classes.
- you might want to refrain from entering romantic or sexual relationships within the community until you are more settled in the form.
- Speak to the jam facilitator if you need support.

Design your own on-ramp

We offer that you give yourself a gentle "on-ramp" into jamming. Let people know you are a beginner. Ask for dances that are slow, have lots of space, or are non-weight-bearing. Spend some time watching the jam. Attend community classes and labs.