

Welcome Contact Dance Improvisation Newcomer

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

What is Contact Dance Improvisation?

Contact dance improvisation is a social dance involving touch, in which momentum between two or more people is used to create and inspire dance movements. Techniques include rolling point of contact, balancing over a partner's center of gravity, following momentum, and "listening" to one's skin surface. It is accessible to people with no previous dance training and people with physical disabilities.

What are REASON d'etre dance Jams?

Our dance jams are a place to practice the "Root" form of contact improvisation (also sometimes called "classical" contact improvisation). It is also the aim of our dance jams to practice contact improvisation in a consent-based culture.

Acclimatization period

Please expect that there will be an acclimatization period while you get to know what contact improvisation is and the jam culture, we practice it in. It can be a very different way of relating than you may be used to. This tip sheet and the [RDDP Dance Jam Boundary Guidelines](#) can help with your acclimatization process.

Helpful things to know:

- You need to read through the [RDDP Dance Jam Guidelines](#) (in a black binder on the table and on our Web site) and sign off that you agree to uphold them before dancing
- We ask that you follow affirmative consent practices
Affirmative Consent involves going forward with an activity in dance only when a "yes" is given. The reasons for the "yes" can vary and can include because someone enthusiastically wants to or because someone wants to explore an "edge" (for example try out a new lift). The idea with *Affirmative Consent* practices is that it raises the bar. One does not just proceed until a "no" is expressed but one instead watches and listens for the signs of a "yes".
- RDDP Dance Jams are a screen-free space (no checking phones or tablets in the dance studio). You are welcome to check them in the hallway.
- Keep your eyes open when you dance as the room can get busy.
- Be still off to the side and move into the studio. If you remain still on the dance floor, it can be dangerous. If we are all moving, we somehow manage to not bump into each other for

the most part. It is the still person in the center of the room that tends to get bumped and stepped on.

- Wear clothes that are not slippery and cover a lot of skin surfaces.
- Make sure your toenails are short and that you are not wearing jewelry, zippers, or buttons that can scratch your partner
- It is generally not safe to grab or lock another dancer into a position that compromises their mobility because your partner no longer has a choice as to how they will move and their landing gear (feet and arms) can become inaccessible.
- We are all humans and sometimes you may notice yourself becoming sexually aroused during a dance. We ask that in these circumstances you do not pursue this arousal. Just notice it and let it pass. Some may need to end a dance to facilitate this.
- Learn to let go of each dance as it ends so that you do not take meaning from dance into life off the dance floor.

What is going on, on the dance floor? RDDP Dance Jams are a place to practice contact dance improvisation in a consent-based culture. 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. We, therefore, ask you to assess your ability to navigate intense themes and hold back on these types of explorations if you feel you do not have the skill, knowledge, practice, or vocabulary (verbal and non-verbal) with which to assert your boundaries and navigate consent in these cases.

If you have had an intense dance with someone and you are unsure of how the process of acquiring consent for that exploration went, it is a good idea to check in with them verbally.

Boundary skill building

These are the skills you will need to acquire to have the dances you want to have.

- You have the right to accept or refuse any dance without needing to give a reason or apology. We suggest you practice this frequently until you gain comfort in doing so.

- End a dance whenever you want, even if it has only lasted a minute. We suggest you practice this frequently until you gain comfort in doing so. A common and recognized way of ending a dance is to clasp your hands together as in prayer, look at your partner and nod your head, and then back away.
- Learn non-verbal and verbal techniques to avoid being lifted. The “wet noodle” approach often works best in which your release tone and become floppy like a wet noodle. You can also move to verbal feedback at any time.
- Learn non-verbal and verbal techniques that let you be in control of how much weight is borne on you. Nudging someone back onto their weight or making your body structure more vertical (i.e. no ledges to put weight on) often works best. You can always move to verbal feedback at any time.
- Learn non-verbal and verbal techniques to redirect dances. Learn to:
 - a) slow someone down by moving slow and heavy,
 - b) shift your partner to back-to-back contact if their front energy is uncomfortable by pushing someone away and dance with a forearm rolling point of contact if you need some space. Also, remember you can end the dance at any time.

You may experience some of the following while you acclimatize yourself to jam culture:

• **Altered states:**

- a) oxytocin and endorphin highs can occur as a result of the level and amount of touch involved in the dance form. This might feel like a blissed-out feeling.
- b) emotions can be triggered due to touch and relational aspect dances.
- c) disorientation and even nausea due to rolling around and being upside down can occur. Please know this is normal and usually goes away by the third or fourth time you attend a jam. If you feel nauseous, we recommend sitting out and watching for a while until you feel better.
- d) inability to organize experience. There might not yet be a “psychological box” in your psyche to place your jamming experience in, and this can be disorientating.

These altered states mentioned above usually resolve themselves as you get more used to contact dance improvisation. As with any altered state, care is needed. Make sure to spend some time grounding before you leave the studio. We recommend breathing slowly especially slow exhales and taking part in some after-jam chit-chat to help ground yourself.

Talk to friends, seek professional help or speak to the jam facilitator if you are feeling overwhelmed.

- **Associations that touch is 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 platonic touch that occurs at a jam. Therefore, in your first few weeks of jamming, you might easily lead, or even lead your partners, into dances that have sexualized energy. You must know that this might happen. If it does, just end the dance and take some downtime. Also, having short dances can help. This association will usually resolve itself over time and touch can gain different meanings.

- **Reflexive actions** might make you easy to lift and make it seem like you are saying “yes” to a lift when you are not. 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 and experiences 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” (release tone and let the body be floppy) as a way not to be lifted will help override the startle reflex. You can also always move to verbal feedback if you do not want to be lifted. Also, RDDP has worked to educate the community not to lift newcomers at our dance jams until they have acclimatized themselves to the form.

- **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 leading to hurt and even abuse. In the contact dance improvisation communities, this phenomenon has not just occurred within romantic relationships but can occur within dances. As a newcomer, you might not yet have the skills to assert your boundaries in dances or community relationships. If someone tries to take advantage of this fact, please speak with the jam facilitator. This risk of newcomer/more-experienced dancer power imbalance usually will resolve itself as you acclimatize yourself to jam culture.

As a newcomer, you can if you want:

- Tell your dance partners you are new to contact improvisation and/or the Jam

- Practice ending a dance

- Practice saying no to a dance

- Design your dances to give yourself a slow on-ramp into contact improvisation that has less risk to overwhelm you. You can do this by designing dances by making requests of your dance partners. :
 - Request that your partner does not lift you
 - Request that your partner does not bear weight upon you
 - Request an anti-contact dance (a dance with no touch)
 - Request a simple arm dance (dance with only arms and hands touching)
 - Request a simple back-to-back dance with no rolling/surfing (dance with backs touching)

- Take some contact classes

- Speak to the jam facilitator if you need support

- Not explore intense themes in dance until you settle in the form and community and have built up boundary-setting skills

- If your acclimatization process involves a steep learning curve or is triggering, you might want to refrain from entering into romantic or sexual relationships within the community until you are more settled in the form

If you need any support during your acclimatization period, please speak with the jam facilitator.