

Welcome Contact Dance Improvisation Newcomer

Here are some tips to help you with your first jam or class.

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 centre of gravity, following momentum, and "listening" with one's skin surface. It is accessible to people with no previous dance training and to people with physical disabilities. The Wednesday Dance Jam is a place to practice classical contact dance improvisation in a consent-based culture.

Acclimatisation period

Please expect that there will be an acclimatisation period while you get to know what contact dance 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. This tip sheet and the [Wednesday Dance Jam Boundary Guidelines](#) can help.

Helpful things to know:

- **Wednesday Dance Jam is a screen-free space** (no checking phones or tablets)
- **Keep your eyes open** when you dance as the room can get busy
- **Be still off to the side and move in 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 centre of the room that tends to get bumped and stepped on.
- **Wear clothes that are not slippery and cover a lot of skin surface**
- **Make sure your toenails are short and that you are not wearing jewellery 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 that you do *not* pursue this arousal. Just notice it and let it pass.

What is going on on the dance floor?

The Wednesday Dance Jam is a place to practice classical contact dance 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. We, therefore, ask you assess your ability to navigate intense themes and hold back on these types of exploration if you feel you do not have the skill, knowledge, practice, vocabulary (verbal and non-verbal) with which to navigate consent. 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 and you can 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 to you.** Nudging someone back onto their own weight often works best and you can always move to verbal feedback at any time.
- **Learn non-verbal and verbal techniques to redirect dances.** Learn to:
 - a) **twist out of arm- locks,**
 - b) **slow someone down** by moving slow and heavy,
 - c) **shift your partner to back-to-back contact** if their front energy is uncomfortable.
 - d) **push someone away** and dance with forearm rolling-point of contact if you need some space.

Also, remember you can end a dance at any time.

- **Learn to let go of each dance as it ends and so that you do not take meaning from a dance into life off the dance floor.**

You may experience some of the following while you acclimatise 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 form.
 - 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.**
 - d) **inability to organise experience.** There is not yet a psychological box in your psyche to place experience in, and this can be disorientating.

These altered states usually resolve themselves as you get more used to contact dance 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.

- **Associations that touch leads 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 acclimatise yourself to the range of sensual-to-platonic touch that occurs at a jam. Therefore in your first few of weeks of jamming, you might be easily lead, or even lead your partners, into dances that have sexualised energy. It is important that you 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.
- **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 that fact that their body stiffens can make them very easy to lift. Learning to wet noodle 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.
- **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, I have seen this phenomenon not just occur within romantic relationships but 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 to the jam facilitator. This newcomer/more-experienced dancer power imbalance usually resolves its self as you acclimatise yourself to jam culture.

As a newcomer you might want to:

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