

Proactive Management of “Problem Dancers”—Creating a Dance Environment Safe for All

by Will Loving



Why do we love community dance? The reasons are as varied as the individuals who attend, but most would probably say something about community, a safe place to meet and interact with other people who like to dance, and the pure joy of moving and dancing to live music. Community dance provides an opportunity for complete strangers to come together and interact in structured ways that are far closer in terms of physical contact, and more personal and intimate, than almost anywhere else in most people’s lives. We hold hands, walk arm in arm, look into each other’s eyes, and for three to eight seconds (many times across a night), hold each other in the open embrace of a swing.

It is this “structured intimacy” that provides much of the appeal of contra dance and community dance in general. The structure, boundaries, and expectations of the dance form and dance events allow this closer-than-normal physical contact between strangers to be experienced as friendly and safe for dancers of all ages. And overall, it is.

What then, as dancers and organizers, do we do when someone does not respect the boundaries and expectations that allow this kind of close personal contact to occur? How do we respond when someone reports that they were uncomfortable or felt that their body or their personal space was disrespected? How do we even find out about such events when they are often subtle and transitory, leaving the recipient confused about what (if anything) just happened?

Here are some examples of actual experiences, some paraphrased, as reported to me and others. As you read these, think about how often you might have experienced this or heard someone describe something like it, and think about what (if anything) was done about it:

- He always pulls me in too close on the swing. I’ve said it’s not OK, but he does it anyway. I now switch lines to avoid him.
- Did he touch my breast intentionally or was it accidental? [endemic]
- During a swing, his arm is always too close to or pressed into my chest.
- He just put his hand low on my hip instead of on my waist or in my hand during the courtesy turn...it felt inappropriate, but was that an accident or intentional?
- She keeps pulling me in close and pressing her body against mine.
- I am a (large person, older person, in a wheelchair, transgendered, deaf person). People look past me, turn me down, or otherwise won’t dance with me.
- She swore at me loudly...when asked politely not to make critical comments about other dancers.
- He just lifted me into the air, again, after I told him not to. [younger experienced dancer]
- They were high or had alcohol on their breath.
- He kept holding my hand and talking to me after the dance ended, and that felt uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to leave. Then when he let go, he bent down and kissed me on top of my head. I don’t know what to do...
- He keeps following me alongside the set and watching me as I dance. When I reported it to the organizer, she said, “Well, let’s give him another chance.” [13-year old]
- When we were swinging, I could feel that he had an erection. How do I deal with that?!
- He kept staring at my cleavage.
- He pushed his hips into mine.

photo by Noah Loving

Because of behaviors like this, dancers, both new and experienced, have walked away from their local dances and not returned. And they will continue to do so unless we act. Someone suggested in an online thread recently that the apparent rise of this kind of “bad behavior” was caused by trends such as techno contra and the influence of other dance styles. But the sad truth is that these kinds of experiences have always happened at community dance events.

In the past, violations of boundaries have frequently been not reported at all, but even when they were reported, the organizer(s) has ignored, dismissed, excused, or downplayed the incident and has taken little or no action on it. There are many reasons for this lack of response:

- The organizer has no experience dealing with such issues and doesn’t know where to start.
- The organizer feels uncomfortable with confrontation or embarrassed about the subject
- The offender is a friend of the organizer.
- The dance depends on the offender for providing a key service such as doing sound.
- The organizer does not have much time, is generally overwhelmed, etc.

What is changing in the last five to seven years, however, is that because of changes in the broader culture, the culture of silence is being replaced by a “culture of consent,” in which mutual consent is expected at all times. This change is especially noticeable amongst dancers and dance organizers under 35 who are far less willing to tolerate any inappropriate behavior and have a far greater willingness to speak up to the person involved and to bring issues to the organizers’ attention.

Women over 35—as reported to me by the women themselves—are often much less likely to report problems directly to dance event leaders, though younger woman may be reluctant too. The reasons given for not reporting incidents, regardless of age, are usually:

- I didn’t want to make a scene.
- I would be too embarrassed to talk about it or say what happened.
- I didn’t want to make him feel bad.
- I feel as if it’s my fault [the legacy of internalized sexism].
- Nothing will be done anyway (or my concerns will be dismissed).

Newer, beginning dancers are also far *more* likely to not say anything but rather just leave and never come back. The practice of “booking ahead,” which is more prevalent at larger urban dances, tends to leave the newer and less experienced dancers looking for partners and makes them easier targets for inappropriate behavior.

Most of the above involves male dancers interacting with female dancers, often significantly younger female dancers, but sometimes the offender is female, and sometimes the gender identity or gender expression of the person on the receiving end is significant in the context of the interaction. So, in addition to sexism and the more common dynamics, we also need to be aware of homophobic and transphobic behavior as possible concerns.

What you can do

Whether you are an organizer or dancer, the single most important thing you can do to start is to *consciously decide to make the subject of inappropriate behavior and dancer safety a priority* for your dance. This is true even if you are not currently aware of any existing issues. Behavior issues can and will occur at every dance, and the only way to protect and grow your dance community is to be proactive about making sure that existing issues are corrected and that new issues are handled promptly and fully. In addition:

- **Talk about it.** Include Behavior Issues as a *standing* agenda item for organizer meetings.
- **Assess current conditions** at your dance. If you haven’t discussed behavior before or in a while, stop and think about what problems might exist.
- **Have a vision for your dance.** What do you want the culture and feeling of the dance to be: friendly, welcoming, safe? What can you do to encourage that?
- **Don’t do it alone.** Make your organizing group larger. Involve community members who you trust, and who may have relevant background such as in counseling or social services, to think well and thoughtfully about this.

- **Solicit feedback and reports.** Let dancers regularly know—*directly, through personal conversations rather than announcements*—that you want to hear about any problem behavior that they 1) experience, 2) observe, or 3) hear about, anonymously if necessary. You need to know what’s happening out there, even if it’s not immediately actionable.
- **Communicate at your dance.** Occasionally, make a more general announcement like “If you have a problem or suggestion at the dance, just talk to anyone wearing a Dance Committee button, or come to the door person.” Have dance etiquette posters along with more specific notices in the bathrooms communicating every dancer’s right to be safe, to be respected, and to say no, as loudly as necessary.
- **Communicate regionally.** Communicate and coordinate with other dance organizers in your region to keep an eye on potential problems. However, keep confidentiality and the potential for rumors in mind; keep names under discussion on a need-to-know basis.
- **Include younger community members.** Make sure that you have younger members of the dance community in your organizing group and in positions of responsibility. The Downtown Amherst organizing committee has ten members, eight of whom are 35 and under.
- **Encourage a culture of consent**, e.g., “May I dip you?” “Do you want to twirl?” See the 2014 Dance Flurry notice on Consent, <http://amherstcontra.org/Flurry2015ConsentNotice.pdf>. Let dancers know that if they feel uncomfortable and cannot manage the situation verbally, they have the right to walk away from the line, even including letting the line fall apart.

Taking action when something happens

Every observed or reported behavior issue is unique and requires a unique, thoughtful, and appropriate response. In most cases, the most important things you’re going to be doing are listening and gathering information. However, if there is an immediate safety issue, do not hesitate to act as required—up to and including calling 911. Keep these recommendations in mind when something happens:

- Designate one person to be in charge—usually the Dance Manager—but pull other organizers or committee members in to witness and listen. Leading is important. The dance manager should think with others, but don’t turn it into a committee process if you’re dealing with something that requires action in the moment at a dance. Trust your thinking and act on behalf of the safety of your dancers.
- Focus on and listen to the victim/recipient first and the offender second. Accused offenders will often feel bad or scared, but your focus needs to be with the victim, making sure that they feel safe and heard.
- Not every issue requires a direct response. Sometimes all it takes is for a person to be heard.
- It is critically important to acknowledge the experience of the recipient/victim. Your response should include:
 - “Thank you for telling me.”
 - “It wasn’t your fault, and you didn’t do anything wrong.”
 - “We take this seriously.”
 - “We will investigate this and follow up with you.”
- Important: Be aware that while every recipient/victim needs to be listened to, respected, and helped to feel safe, their degree of upset *is not a valid gauge for your response*. Unless there is an immediate safety issue, you need to listen first, gather information from everyone involved, and decide (based on what actually occurred) what the next steps are. Even if you have heard secondhand stories about this person, your actions need to be based on firsthand information, primarily what happened at your dance.

When talking with the alleged offender keep this in mind:

- If you are dealing with both the recipient/victim and the accused/offender in the moment at a dance, *don’t* leave the recipient/victim on their own while you go talk to the offender unless you are clear that they are OK and feeling safe. Have another organizer stay with them.
- The behavior in question might have been completely unintentional, but the impact on the recipient needs to be validated and taken seriously.
- Assuming that you’re willing to work with the offender, they need to accept responsibility for their actions regardless of intention.

Consequences and Taking Action

Often, cases/issues that I have dealt with have been resolved through a conversation with the offending dancer, often at the break or after the dance. However, some individuals repeat their behaviors over and over, despite discussion

and warning from organizers. When that happens, the organizers must decide if a more serious consequence is required—in particular, banning the offender from the dance, permanently or for a specific length of time. Because of the uniqueness of each situation, there are no hard and fast rules, but here are some suggestions based on my own experience dealing with several such cases and talking with other organizers.

1. Stick to what actually happened and was observed or reported, the specific ways that boundaries were crossed, the objections ignored, and the behavior that was inappropriate.
2. Document and compile the above specifics. If this is a longtime problem, there are probably lots of stories out there. Talk to experienced dancers and ask them to write specific accounts of what happened to them, when, and what they did about it. They can submit the incidents anonymously if they wish but in my experience, most have wanted to be identified to the offender.
3. Keep confidentiality in mind. The above compiled information and plans should not be gossiped about or passed around. The victim/recipient has a right to know what you are doing, but you don't need to share everything with them, and you can also ask them to respect confidentiality.
4. Have a group of committee members (or trustworthy community members, if your organizing group is small) meet with the offender to talk about what has been happening and specifically to go over the above documented list of offenses and prior actions. Give them the opportunity to respond. This is a critical step in my opinion and should only be skipped in cases of extreme behavior.
5. Think before meeting with the offender about at least a couple of strategies, depending on how the offender responds. Some will be defensive or in denial, but some will honestly express a desire to reform their behavior. Have clear, specific guidelines as to how they are to behave and be in physical contact with other dancers. As an example, one dancer was offered the following specifics if he were to return to the dance at a future date:
 - You should strive to have your behavior always be “above reproach.”
 - Always stand upright and keep a respectful distance between you and your partner.
 - Do not lean or bend over and put your face anywhere near the partner's body.
 - In a courtesy turn, put your hand on your partner's hand and nowhere else.
 - During a swing, keep your right arm curved well away from your partner and keep good distance between you.
 - Never hug a partner unless they are a member of your family.
 - Outside of the walkthrough and the dance, do not hold hands with other dancers or touch them in any other way.
 - Avoid dancing with new dancers. Dance with people you know.

Taking on the challenge of dealing with “bad behavior” at our community dances is not what most volunteer organizers “signed up for.” However, these problems and problem individuals exist, and if they are not dealt with, they will cause dancers—especially new dancers—to walk away and not return. The future of every individual dance series depends on our taking this seriously and being proactive in dealing with it. What that means will differ for each series or event, but deciding now to make it part of your organizing and your awareness will get you started making your dance the friendly, welcoming, and safe place that you want it to be.

This article was derived in part from a Workshop session presented by Will at the “Puttin’ On the Dance” dance organizers workshop in Ottawa, Ontario, in March 2015. (CDSS was a cosponsor of the event.)

Will Loving has been participating in, teaching, and organizing contra and swing dance for over thirty-five years. He is the founder of the Downtown Amherst (MA) weekly contra dance and the fourth Friday Greenfield Challenging Contra series. His passion is drawing people together, engendering and supporting connection and community, and creating a space for people to experience the “reliable joy” of community dance.

NOTE: CDSS Task Group Forming

CDSS is forming a task group to look at best practices for communities to use in handling difficult and inappropriate behavior that happens at their dances. Our goal is not to offer legal advice, but to develop resources for groups to use in handling the different situations their communities face. If you're interested in participating in the task group, please contact Rima Dael, CDSS Executive Director, rima@cdss.org.