

## Problem Dancers

### Proactive management and response, creating a dance environment safe for all

*Will Loving*

It's a big question that we must all face: How can we manage our dances and respond to issues that arise in a way that allows for dancers of any age, gender expression or background to experience community dance as safe, respectful and fun? Or, more pointedly, how can we keep bad/creepy/unsafe/ inappropriate behavior from driving people away? This session will look at the variety of dancer behavior issues that can arise, the responses that can be required, responding effectively, ways to encourage the reporting of issues, ways to not be alone with difficult problems, and how to proactively create a culture of consent.

Will Loving has been gathering information on problem dancers over the past three years from all over the northeast USA. Will's knowledge comes from direct experience—he runs dance series in Northampton, MA and in Greenfield, MA—and by soliciting information on Facebook. Organizers, he reports, are often not aware that dancers have been hurt, offended, or sexually harassed, and do not know how to respond to bad behavior.

How can we respond to things that happen so as to allow all dancers a safe, respectful, comfortable, and inviting experience? How can we keep creepy behavior from driving people away from dances?

Loving read, or paraphrased, several reports made in the past 3 years. Sample complaints included:

- “She swore at me loudly...when asked not to make critical comments.”
- “They were high, drinking.”
- “I am a ... large woman, older woman, in a wheelchair, transgendered, deaf... I had a serious accident as a teen and sometimes stumble or speak haltingly. People won't dance with me.”
- “Did he touch my breast intentionally or was it accidental?”
- “He kept holding my hand and talking after the dance.”
- “He bent down and kissed the top of my head.”
- “He keeps following me along the side of dance.”
- “She keeps pulling me in close and pressing her body against mine.”
- “A dancer holds me close and sometimes has an erection when we swing.”
- “He kept staring at my cleavage.”
- “He pushed his hips into mine.”

People have left dances and not returned because of such behaviors. Newer dancers are far more likely not to say anything, but just leave and never come back.

Community dances involve structured intimacy. They need an agreed-upon set of boundaries. Now there is less tolerance for inappropriate behavior. Women over 35 tend not to report bad behavior. The new generation of more empowered female dancers tend to speak up. In addition to sexism we also need to be aware of homophobic and transphobic behavior as well.

However, when women, young or old, bring up a problem to organizers, particularly older individuals, they are frequently not taken seriously or treated with respect. The phrase “Let’s give him one more chance” was used in at least one egregious incident of stalking a 12-year old girl.

#### Tips:

- Be proactive. Decide who the point person(s) is (are), and let people know you want to hear about problem behavior, anonymously if necessary. For instance: “If you have a problem talk to anyone wearing a blue button. They’re members of the committee, or come see us at the money table.” Place signs in bathrooms encouraging dancers to say “No” loudly and clearly and to report bad behavior.
- Focus on victims first, not offenders.
- Bad behavior might be completely unintentional, but the impact on the recipient needs to be validated and taken seriously.
- Remember the importance of the victim. Will described a caller, hearing a story from a 14-year-old girl about the bad behavior of an older gent, saying: “Thank you for telling me. It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t do anything wrong. We take this seriously. We’ll investigate this and follow up with you.”
- Listen to all involved. Not every issue requires a direct response. Sometimes all it takes is for a person to be heard.
- Cooperate with other dance organizers in your region to keep an eye on potential problems. Keep names under discussion on a need to know basis and be aware of the consequences of rumors.
- Boston Intergenerational Dance Association (BIDA) has prepared useful etiquette guideline posters.

#### Summary:

- Decide to lead, to be proactive rather than reactive.
- Have a vision for your dance.
- Don’t do it alone. Include behavior issues as a standing item on organizing committee meetings.
- Assess current conditions.
- Encourage a culture of consent vs. a culture of silence. For example, “May I dip you?” “Do you want to twirl?”
- Dancers who are made to feel uncomfortable and cannot manage the situation verbally have the right to walk away from the dance.
- Put up informative signs in bathrooms, etc.

Final comment from Will: I would like to personally encourage all male dance leaders and organizers to learn to dance the “lady’s” side of the dance, to regularly dance with other men, and to encourage other men to do the same. I see this as one effective way to shake up the habits, structures and ways of dancing together that allow bad behavior to go unseen and unaddressed.

From OCD – Organizers of Contra Dance Facebook Group – Posted Feb 17, 2015

Dear dance organizers,

When I was last in Seattle, I took pictures of some signs from the bathrooms at the Phinney Ridge dance and posted them on one of the Facebook contra pages. The signs addressed both men and women about unwanted or “boorish” behavior, how to avoid doing it and how to respond if you were on the receiving end. I posted these as a way of promoting discussion on what can be done to communicate with dancers about behavioral expectations and in particular to empower those on the receiving end of offensive, inappropriate or unwanted behavior to speak up rather than accept it quietly or just leave. I thought the signs were an excellent start. (<http://on.fb.me/1MjFYKD> )

Since then, I have continued to have discussions with dancers and other organizers about this online and in person and we’ve also had to work through dealing with complaints about several individuals. Most recently at the 2015 Dance Flurry weekend in Saratoga Springs the presence of a couple of attendees raised some alerts and caused the staff of the Flurry to take a more proactive stance prior to and at the Festival. I was so deeply impressed by what they did and how effective it was that I wanted to share it with you to encourage the kind of safe and welcoming environment that we all want to see at our dance events.

As you’ll see when you read it, the Flurry statement goes beyond just saying “no” and encouraging the reporting of bad behavior by specifically giving examples of what consent is and how to say no. It also gives explicit permission for someone to do whatever is required to ensure their own sense of safety, including leaving in the middle of a dance. A couple of weeks ago I gave a similar directive to the members of the Downtown Amherst organizing committee to do whatever was necessary to safeguard our dancers, including interrupting the dance if necessary (as part of a discussion about several dancers, including one with mental health issues and a history of violence who might show up at our dance).

For too long, “bad behavior” has been in many instances tolerated or ignored. Dancers have been hurt physically and emotionally, abused, offended, and sexually harassed and preyed upon by individuals in the contra dance community and organizers have either been unaware because the incidents were not reported or the reports have been ignored or met with a lack of ability or awareness to know how to respond appropriately. I could say that most of the offenders have been men and most of the recipients have been women, but that would trivialize the instances when the reverse has been true and also where homophobia and transphobia have been part of the behavioral dynamic. As the statement from Flurry says, we need to create a “strong culture of consent” for ALL dancers.

Credit and kudos go to Tamara Flanders and the administrative staff of Dance Flurry for the following statement, which was posted on bathroom mirrors, walls and other obvious places at the Dance Flurry. Based, at least on anecdotal accounts, it seems to have made a significant difference on the dance floor in terms of the amount of “asking first,” and respecting the answer second, that was taking place.

I’m sending this to as many organizers as I can think of off the top of my head but please feel free to forward it.

Sincerely,

Will Loving, Founder & Programming Director

- Downtown Amherst Contra Dance
- Greenfield Challenging Contrás (4<sup>th</sup> Fridays)

## The 2015 Dance Flurry message about Consent

(Posted on bathroom mirrors and hallway walls)

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Flurry Goers!

Public service announcement from your loving Flurry directors. We strive for a strong culture of consent at The Flurry. This means that all actions, on and off the dance floor, should be consensual. This includes “little” things like, asking your partners if they wish to be dipped or picked up, and bigger things like not making unwanted advances on others. This goes for all genders. Please treat everyone with kindness and respect! If you find yourself in a situation where you do not feel you are being treated appropriately by someone at the festival, and you feel you need help managing the situation, please seek out site services (folks in the bright vests working all over the place) and ask for their help contacting the appropriate people to help you out. You can also request help at the information table and they will contact the appropriate people to help you. While we hope there are no situations where this is warranted, we are here to help and would like to create a safe space for everyone to dance and have fun!

What can you do to promote a culture of consent?

- Be a role model of consensual behavior.
- Be respectful of your partners and friends.
- Don't make assumptions about what someone else might want.
- Ask questions of your dance partners and people in your circle.

For example:

- Dip?
- Lift?
- Do we have a mutual attraction thing going on?
- Is it okay if I \_\_\_\_\_?
- Respect without question that no means no.

And so on.

If someone is interacting with you in a way that you are not comfortable with, use your voice.

For example:

- No.
- Stop.
- I don't like that.
- A hand up to signal a stop.

And so on.

If you are dancing with someone, or interacting with them in another way, and you are uncomfortable in a way that is not manageable with words, you have the right to remove yourself from the situation. Even if it's in the middle of the dance. Your personal safety is more important than the flow of a dance. If you experience this level of problem with a fellow dancer please report to site services so that we can help further.

Let's all be kind and respectful and have an amazing Flurry!