Inspiring Dance Connections

Finding Flow

Increasing awareness in partner dance

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Finding Flow

Increasing awareness in partner dance

So you're interested in partner dancing? Great, this guide is for you! It's is all about bringing awareness and flow into your dancing so you feel in the moment and inspired when you dance, and not in your head thinking. I'm going to introduce three essential areas of partner dance and how to begin practising them in a mindful way. You will find exercises along the way and as you start getting into them you will become far more aware of yourself, the music and your dance partnerships. You will begin to get more clarity about who you are, how you relate to music and you become able to express yourself with more ease and creativity.

I will discuss the essence of what partner dance is and how you can begin your practice of dancing in a mindful way. You'll find the exercises simple and practical and they will bring focus to different aspects of your dance enabling you to become more aware and conscious of how you do what you do. These exercises are for dancers with little experience or even a lot. If you're just beginning to partner dance, you'll find the exercises give you a great foundation for further learning. If you're already a partner dancer you will begin to cultivate a more conscious approach to the dancing you're already doing. For you, these exercises will serve as a springboard to going deeper into what you already know. They will help you strip things back to basics and build them up again with a focus on mindful practice.

Mindfulness, consciousness, awareness; what does it all mean?

Three terms which are getting a lot of air play these days, and with good reason. People are calling to get back in touch with who they are; calling for better relationships with themselves, their bodies and the people in their lives. I use these terms to indicate the deliberate act, or practice of, becoming *more* aware. When you bring your focus right down into yourself, who you are and how you move, you expand your experience. This leads to greater flow, connection and creativity in your dancing, and by extension, your whole life as well.

What is flow?

When I talk about flow, I mean being in a state of non-thinking. The space where you are totally lost in the moment, doing your activity, being creative and it's just coming through you without you having to force anything or think about it.

The exercises

The exercises are designed to be simple. So whether you're new to dancing or

have experience, they are great for building good foundations or breaking your dancing down to become aware of unconscious habits. The aim of this guide is that you tap into more creativity and find yourself in a state of flow when you dance; being in the moment. Whatever your dance experience, through reflecting upon and practising these exercises, you'll be building solid foundations for discovering more and more about your own dancing and your partner dancing as well. I encourage you to make time for yourself to practice each one and see how it enhances your dancing.

The three essential areas of partner dance

The three areas I talk about are yourself, the music and your dance partnership. It's the combination of all of them that make up a partner dance. Bringing conscious focus to each of these areas brings your dance to life through an increased awareness of your own body; musical timing and expression; and other people and your relationship with them.

What is improvisation?

The type of partner dancing that I advocate is rooted in improvisation. That means that there are no pre-set sequences of steps to learn when it comes to dancing to a song. In improvisation you have the freedom to listen to the music which is playing and then let yourself be moved to 'make up' the dance together as you go along. So what I'm going to explain here is going to help you create this joyful, expressive and connected type of dance. The three essential areas mentioned above are not sequential steps you need to *master* before you can begin dancing with a partner, but things to build upon and deepen your dancing skills so you can enhance your overall partner dance experience. By getting more comfortable with each of these key elements, your dancing will go from strength to strength.

What is partner dancing?

Before we get right into it, let's talk a little about what partner dancing actually is. You may be familiar with the term, and types of dances such as ballroom, waltz and tango come to mind. That's great, partner dancing is all of these and more, and my definition of partner dance is:

> *One dance, danced by two people, together.*

Yep, that's it. Very simple, but the dances you can create with this dynamic are many. Depending on the style of music, the dance is going to change, as it is the music which drives the dance. I'll talk more about this in part two later.

Partner dance is *one* dance which needs *two* separate inputs to work. These two different and distinct parts fit perfectly together to make up a whole. That whole

is neither one part nor the other, but actually a third entity, the dance that you create together. These two parts of the dance are called the 'lead' part and the 'follow' part and I'll talk more about this in part three.

Now you know what partner dance is and how bringing your mindful awareness to each area of the dance is going to increase your creativity and flow, so let's get started!

1. Awareness of yourself – your body, movement and enjoying your own dancing

Dance is a body practice. This is your home and your vehicle for expression. You dance to be completely in the moment and not in your head thinking. Becoming more aware of your body and how you move is of major importance. The more you are connected to yourself, the more you are able to express in your dancing.

In this section you'll learn how to increase your awareness of yourself and how you move. You'll also learn how to create a space which allows you to dance freely and uninhibited.

What is body awareness and why is it important?

Body awareness is the process of becoming more in tune with how you are personally built in your body and how you move, specifically as yourself. Everyone is different and everyone moves in a slightly different way, so knowing yourself and being aware of yourself will help you get the most out of your dancing. You will find that by becoming more attuned to your body your capacity for making finer and more precise movements will increase. You will also find that your ability to connect to your partner in partner dancing will increase and your partner dancing will become more and more rewarding.

On purely a safety level, if you're not in touch with your body it could lead to injury. You may not be able to hear what your body is saying and push yourself too hard. Or, you could do movements that are damaging to your body and not be aware of it. Both things to avoid for long-lived enjoyment of dancing. What's more, once you start dancing with a partner awareness of your own body and movements will mean you understand how *you* like to dance and what you are capable of. Once you are clear on this yourself you know what you bring to the partnership and you won't let yourself dance in ways that are not right for you.

Finally, partner dancing is like any sport, in that sometimes things happen unexpectedly. With increased awareness of your body you will be able to change any moves that feel uncomfortable – even if they happen quickly!

Creating your personal space for dancing

Dance is a flowing activity, something you do to get out of your head and to stop thinking so that you can get in touch with the music and express creativity, with or without a partner. When I talk about a personal space for dancing I mean bringing yourself from the thinking, working, parenting, getting from A to B space, to a more present focussed state of awareness. This space, or mindset, is where you want to be to really enjoy your dancing and get into flow. Since this present and aware state doesn't just happen in an instant, you need to actively create an opening for it to happen. It helps to make a practice of getting your surroundings, body and mind all working together to help you get into that zone. The more you take the time to practice getting into your dancing space, the easier it becomes and the more awareness you can bring to your dancing. The idea is to slow down and make the *intention* to leave everything at the door. It may not come easily some days and some days it will. Either way, you've given yourself the best chance to shift your focus and engage in dancing for your own enjoyment. Not only this but you will be more present with your dance partners when you come to dance together.

How to begin to practice body awareness

Exercise

Firstly, bring your awareness to yourself by slowing down and becoming still. Take a few breaths to begin with. Just by taking the time to notice your breath and how it flows into and out of your body will start to bring your awareness to your body. Then bring your attention to your feet. Feel them on the ground and wiggle your toes. In a standing position, shift your weight from the toes to your heels. Feel the weight of your body run through every part of your feet from the back to the front. Bring your attention down to where you feel yourself connected to the ground and feel yourself supported by the surface you're on. Just taking a few minutes to move from outwardly focussed things to inwardly focussed sensations will give you a great start to your dance session. Do this for as long as it takes for your mind to slow and you are feeling more present in your body.

Warm up

Avoiding injury by warming up the muscles before physical activity goes without saying. You do it before you play football, tennis or any other sport, and in this respect dancing is no different. However, there are more reasons to warm up than just to prevent injuries. Warming up is also part of making the transition into your dance space. You're getting in 'the zone'.

No two days will you be exactly the same. You'll have different energy levels, different things going on in your body, different times of the day, different seasons affecting you and any number of thousands of differing factors. Warming up slowly, taking the time to build up from slow moves to faster moves and stretching out muscles is part of your transition into your dance space and it's the perfect opportunity to become more aware of yourself. As you move your body, get a feel for where you are at today and begin tuning in to yourself.

Exercise

As a warm up, you're going to move each part of your body in turn. The idea is to move slowly, and as you move each body part you bring your attention right to it; just seeing how your body is, *right now*. Start at the bottom with your feet, toes and ankles. Gently bend your toes and rotate your ankles. Becoming aware of how these joints move for you today. Moving up through to your legs and knees do the same. Bring your awareness to your knees and bend them a few times taking note of how they move for you today. Then move up through your spine moving it gently and letting it be free. Move up to your shoulders shrug them. Move them around, up, down, forward and backwards. Roll them around and then let the movement incorporate your arms. Bend your elbows and rotate your wrists, getting the whole of the arms moving. Finally move your awareness up through your neck to your head. See where you're holding any tension in your jaw or your neck and let it be soft.

Bring your focus to your whole body and become aware of any stiffness. If it feels good, gently stretch out the muscles associated with each body part. Take your time with this and enjoy it. Enjoy how you are and how you move.

Relaxation

Being relaxed is a huge part of dancing because it allows your body to move more effortlessly. When you are relaxed you can react faster and more spontaneously and you can flow in your movements more easily. This doesn't mean that if you have tension in some part of your body that you're not going to be able to dance, but the more you can relax, the more you'll be able to let the movements flow through your body. When you take the time to transition into your personal dance space by bringing the focus out of your head and into your body, you will naturally start to relax. If you feel you are forcing relaxation, it's going to defeat the purpose and make you more tense. Relaxation happens when you *allow* it to happen. Muscles begin to relax when you become aware of your body because once you become aware of the tension you're holding, you can let it go. You can't let go of tension you are not aware of - just not possible. If you skip taking the time to make your transition into a more body aware state, you miss the opportunity to

discover, and then let go of, any tensions in your body that are not serving your movements.

Enjoying your own solo dancing

If partner dance is a dance of two people, why do you need to be comfortable with dancing on your own? Because partner dance is an amplification of both of your dancing, together. When you're more comfortable with your own dancing you will be able to relax more when dancing with a partner. You'll have confidence in your own steps and you'll not worry if you did the 'right' or 'wrong' thing because every step you do will feel great to you. What's more, if you don't enjoy dancing and moving to music for your own fun, you can find yourself relying on your partner to 'give you a good time' and this can lead to frustration if they don't deliver something you were expecting. In short, if you are able to have fun on your own, you're able to have double the fun with a partner. So as a good practice it pays to get into your own dancing and really enjoy it for its own sake. When you understand how *you* like to dance, how *you* feel comfortable dancing and what *you* like to express in your dancing, you have a solid foundation for bringing all those lovely things to your dance partnership.

Self-consciousness and freeing up your dance flow

Self-consciousness can be a huge barrier to dance. If you've not danced before it may prevent you from giving dance a try in the first place. Or, as an experienced dancer you may feel self-conscious when it comes to improvising, making up your own moves and just going with the flow of the music. It can be much less confronting to stay safe in the dance moves you already know; the ones that have been taught, or have been tried and tested and you know are ok because other people do them. However, in the long run, this can lead to creative stagnation and frustration with your own dancing. When you're feeling self-conscious it's a sign that you're pushing your boundaries and about to step into something new, and new is creative.

Have you ever thought to yourself 'I can't dance', 'I'm a terrible dancer', 'I look silly doing that', or words to that effect? The idea of dancing freely can be intimidating. It's understandable and ok to be shy and nervous about dancing. Maybe it's not something you have been encouraged to do, or it may be something you've been actively discouraged from doing in the past. Even if you are a dancer you might be comfortable dancing but still think 'I might look bad doing *that* move' and be afraid to experiment. This can keep you locked into patterns of only dancing what is 'acceptable' and can lead to stagnating your creativity.

The fear of judgement can be really strong because a lot of the focus on dancing in popular society is on 'looking good'. A lot of our exposure to dance is through

music videos or other professional performances or situations where dancing is highly scrutinized and judged. Competition and performance is only one part of dancing though, and your dancing doesn't have to fall into that category. If all you want to do is bust out and feel free then that's not anyone else's place to judge. You *can* dance just for your own enjoyment and it doesn't have to be for show.

If you find that self-consciousness is holding you back from taking the first step into dancing, or you want to push the boundaries of your own improvisation, it will be really beneficial to make time to put on some music and start dancing for your own fun. The more it feels strange or a little bit uncomfortable, like something you don't really want to do, the more it can benefit you. When you put the music on and start to move, let yourself go with whatever happens. Be an observer to how you're dancing. That means just seeing what happens – without the judgement.

If you are a dancer who has learned to dance formally through classes and learned a particular style of dance, you can be surprised at how your body is locked in to doing particular types of moves. It's really beneficial for your creativity to mix it up and break away from patterns that you're familiar with, so dancing freely without the rule-book is beneficial for every dancer, beginner or experienced.

Releasing inhibitions

The more you move *uninhibited* to music, the easier it becomes. I say *uninhibited* because dancing with judgements in your head will inhibit your flow either subtly or overtly. If you feel you have a voice (either yours or someone else's) inside your head telling you that you suck at this, look bad, can't do it, it's time to eliminate that voice. If you feel self-conscious about moving to music or making up your own steps in improvisation, find yourself a space where you won't be judged, *and that includes your own judgements*. Have you got a space where you can dance by yourself without anyone watching? Even if you've just got 10 minutes in your bathroom with your iPod, no one will be there to watch you and you can begin to get into your own dancing freedom.

Exercise

After warming up, put on some music if you haven't already done so. Start to move to the music and see how much you can get into the flow of your own movements. Just see where the music leads your body to go. You're not thinking about *how* to dance to the music, your dancing just comes spontaneously and is improvised to what you are hearing in the moment. In essence, you let go and *let the music dance you* instead of you 'thinking' about what steps you're going to do. Sounds pretty awesome? It is! You find yourself in a state of flow and in the moment. To get into this flow can take some practice and by starting with the creation of a good dance space (mentioned above) you'll be off to a good start.

In this space you are totally absorbed by what you are doing, doesn't matter how you look or what you are doing. If self-conscious thoughts come up, either drop them or change them into more empowering thoughts. Some helpful thought to try on are 'I'm practising dancing because I want to get better at this, good for me', or 'I give myself complete permission to dance no matter what it looks like,' or 'if it feels good I'm doing it right.' Catching yourself when you're judging your dancing and finding a way to feel better about what you are doing will help your flow immensely in the long fun. There's no place for judgement in dance as that keeps you in your head and out of your dancing body where the effortless flow happens. Just by bringing your focus back to the music and letting your body go with whatever happens your ability to move easily and improvise will start to come.

To sum up this section on body awareness and your own dancing, here are the main points again:

- Increasing body awareness is vitally important in dancing
- Take time to create and enter your personal dance space
- Dancing for your own enjoyment will help your self-confidence and flow and ultimately bring more to your partner dancing

2. Bringing awareness to the music - finding your connection to beat and feeling

In this section you'll learn why the beat is so important in partner dance. You'll learn ways to begin hearing the beats and keeping time to a piece of music so that you have a solid grounding when it comes to partner dancing. Once you've found a connection to the bass part of the music, you'll then begin to tap into your own creativity with the other parts of the song, how it makes you feel and how you can interpret that into your own dance.

Dancing to the beat and in time with your partner

You want to dance in time with the beats so you can stay in time with both the music and with your dance partner as they are also moving to the same beats. When you first start to dance this may be a challenge, but I assure you it's not an insurmountable obstacle. If you think you have no rhythm or are tone deaf, I want to tell you that you *can* learn to hear the beats in the music, and also to move to them, effortlessly. Getting rhythm into your body is a matter of practice. In a computer-bound and intellectually focussed society, getting into your body and

into moving to music may be something that you may not have had much, or any exposure to during your life. It's a case of re-awakening your body to what it's naturally capable of, and you *are* capable of moving to music.

If you've been thinking that dance isn't for you or you've got two left feet, cut yourself some slack. The more you move to music, the easier it becomes, and one day you won't even be thinking about 'how', you'll just find yourself listening to something and without thinking your body will start moving.

Start with the beat

When you first start listening to music for dancing, you might not know where to begin. Start with the beat. This is the regular pulse that plays steadily through the music without change. When it comes to partner dancing, the beat is the part of the music where you and your partner fall into sync with each other because you are both stepping at the same time to the same piece of music. It's like a home base that you come back to in order to stay together in your dance. So learning to hear and dance to the beat is vitally important.

When you listen to music, pick out the beat. Depending on the piece of music it could be played on the drums, a double bass, or piano, or something else that produces the deep, heavy sounding part of the music. Listen to its regularity. It's typically the part that makes you want to tap your foot.

Songs that are great (and easy) for dancing to are structured in a predictable way and have a strong beat that is steady throughout. This type of song gives you a chance to relax into the groove because it's regular and repetitive. The beat is satisfying to dance to because there are no unexpected or sudden changes. Your body can respond easily because the beat is predictable. You have lots of time for your body to get used to the regularity of the pulse and you can start to relax into it knowing it's not going to change. The idea is to relax into a repetitive movement with the beat so you will begin to move to it without thinking about it.

Practice moving to the beat

Exercise

Find some music that you really like that makes you want to move and just listen to it to begin with. You can start by putting it on as background music so you get used to the way it's structured. The caveat is that you have to *like* the music. If you don't really dig the music, it's unlikely that you will feel moved to dance to it and your efforts in trying to let yourself go with the flow will be more difficult. Once you've found that piece of music that you really like, you're going to *let the movement come to you* as opposed to *trying* to dance to it. You're going to get

into a state of *being moved* by the music.

So go ahead and put on that song. What do you hear? Does it have a strong, regular, pulsing beat? If you can you tap your foot to it, then most likely it does. Even if it's slow, if there's a steady beat you can fall into a repetitive motion with it such as foot/finger tapping. Let your movement be driven by the beat of the music; almost as if you're letting the beat of the music tap your foot/finger. If you find that you're thinking about the movement or making an effort to 'get it right', then stop, take a break and go back to just listening to the music. Pick out the pulse with your ears. Become aware of your body as you listen to this song and notice what it does. After some time you may find some yourself moving to the beat without you even thinking about it.

If you find tapping to the beat difficult at first, not to worry, sometimes it can take a little time to come through. If you're not used to doing this then it may not come straight away. Have patience with yourself if it’s not easy to begin with. Just by becoming more aware of the music that you listen to throughout the day, and becoming aware of the pulse that runs through it, can help you to get more in touch with the beat. Becoming *aware* of the beat is the first step. After you've got used to one song, listen out for, and tap the beat to every song you hear throughout your day. Just a finger tap or a toe wiggle is enough, it doesn’t need to be a big movement and you can practice anywhere you like.

Exercise

Once you're feeling comfortable with a toe or finger tap now try stepping to the beat. Anywhere you walk and can listen to music you can practice this. Put your song on your phone or iPod and step to the beat as you walk to the shops or the bus stop. Doesn't matter if it's walking to work or actual practice on the dance floor, your practising stepping in time to the music. At the heart of it, dancing is just a series of steps to a beat, just in different timings and different patterns, so being able to keep timing to the beat effortlessly is a fantastic foundation.

Anytime you find yourself in the supermarket or a shopping centre playing music you can step to the beat. Once you start looking, you'll find that there's loads of opportunities for you to connect with music everywhere you go.

Tuning in to the feel of the music

Once you're feeling comfortable with the beat you can start to connect with other features, instruments and sounds that make up the whole song. You're going to connect to the music by feeling how it makes you feel and putting a name to what you feel as you listen.

Exercise

Put on a song and have a listen to how it *feels* to you. What sort of emotions does it evoke? What words come to mind? Here are some suggestions to get you started. A song could feel heavy, bright, sad, fun, light, energetic, strong or floating. There's no right or wrong so go wild with your adjectives and really get in touch with how it makes *you* feel. Make a list by writing down feelings for one song and then doing another list for another song. Then compare your lists and see how similar or different the feelings of the songs are. Do it for songs of different genres. How does a blues song make you feel as compared to hip hop or a pop song? By writing the words down you are bringing your feelings out and beginning to make an expression of the song.

You may come across a feeling in the music that you can't even put a word to. No worries, bypass the words altogether. You can still *feel* the music though, and even if there's no word for it, there's still some expression you can make for it. So maybe drawing squiggles, circles, spirals or other shapes helps you get your feelings about this piece of music across. Play around and see what works for you.

Let the feeling of the music move your body

Exercise

For the next exercise you're going to focus on just one feeling/word that you wrote down. You're now going to convert that feeling/word into movement. Taking the examples above, if you wrote down light, how do you move if you move in a light way? Feel light in your body. What does light look like and move like to you? Begin to practice moving in a way that represents this feeling to you. If you wrote down fun, how do you move in a fun way? Start moving in a fun way. And so on, how do you move if you wrote down energetic, floating, or in any of the ways that you've written down? The exercise is to get in touch with movement which is inspired by feeling.

If you drew circles to your piece of music, what does that represent? Roundness, softness? How do you move if you move in those ways? If you drew saw-teeth or triangles, does that represent sharpness or short, staccato moves to you? Start to move in a way that represents these feelings to you. Feel that feeling as you start to move and, importantly, *let that feeling do the moving of your body*. That's your dancing expression, letting the feeling of music tell your body how to express itself.

Your body knows exactly how it feels in relation to the music and when you let it, it will move without you having to think about it or force any moves upon it. Let the feeling the music invokes in you be your guide in how to move. The music dictates the dance, not your thinking brain.

The more you get into the feelings and the movements you associate with them, the more it will come more naturally. If you love a piece of music and it feels good to you, your body is going to want to move and respond to it. This is how you become connected to the music in dancing. You and it become one with no separation.

What makes you want to move today?

You are different every day and a piece of music may change in the way it feels to you on a different day or in a different time in your life. It's unlikely that the music which resonated with you when you were growing up or were a teenager still has the same feel to you now. You might still like it when you hear it, but perhaps you don't listen to it all the time with the same passion like you used to. So in order to keep your dancing inspired and fresh, check in with yourself to see what feelings are really moving you now. This also helps to builds awareness of how you are in this present moment. It keeps you true to what you want to be dancing *now* instead of being stuck dancing the same moves you might do out of habit or routine.

Connecting sound and movement

Connecting sounds with movement is what dancing is all about. You've got in touch with the beat and you've connected with the overall feeling of the song, so now it's time to get in touch with the other instruments that are playing along with the beat.

Exercise

So go back to the song you chose in the exercise above and this time listen for the instruments. Just pick out a few things that stand out to you to begin with. For example, maybe there's a long drawn out sound of a trumpet. Maybe you like the short, sharp strums of a rhythm guitar. Whatever sound you pick, you're then going to imagine what sort of movement this sound makes. You may feel that the long drawn out sound of the trumpet would make a long stretching type of movement such as a long slow step or slow opening of both your arms. Or maybe that repetitive rhythm guitar strum makes you want to do short quick steps from one foot to the other. In this way you are starting to build your awareness of all the different parts of the song and you're starting to bring out more and more of the song in your movements. You're building up your awareness of, and your ability to, dance to the *whole* song.

Exercise

As a second part to this exercise, you can turn it around. This time, without listening to any music make a movement with your body. Do it repeatedly so it's not just a random movement but something you can do over and over again to

practice with. Now vocalise the sound that this movement makes. For example, short, sharp steps from one foot to the other might sound like high-pitch 'ta, ta, ta' sounds. Longer, slower movements would have deeper, more drawn out sounds. Vocalise some different sounds one after the other and spend some time having fun moving to your own sounds that you make.

These two exercises are great ways to connect sound and movement and will help you get into *feeling* the music. When you have the ability to comfortably feel the music you won't need to think about the beats or count your steps to stay in time. You won't need to think about how you move, you will just be able to do it. More and more you will be in your body when it comes to moving and not in your head thinking about how or when to move. You'll be able to move spontaneously to the music and improvisation will become really enjoyable, opening up so many opportunities for creativity and to go with the flow of the moment. What's more, it will make help you cultivate a more flexible approach to dancing because you won't get bothered that a move didn't work out how you planned it, or you didn't do what you were expecting to do. Now you can just go with the flow making it up as you go along and it's all an exciting game of discovery. The dance is revealed to you as it unfolds through you, rather than you dictating how this dance is going to be.

So to end this section on music awareness, here are the summary points:

- Find the beat of the music and get comfortable moving to it
- Get in touch with how the music feels to you
- Find out how you want to express the feeling of the music and sounds though movement

3. Awareness in partnership - connecting to your dance partner

So you're feeling warmed-up and in the zone; the music is making your feet all itchy to move; it's now time to dance with another person. In this final part, you'll learn how partner dance works and what it's ingredients are. Now that you've got a great foundation of your own body and musical awareness you can really begin to create a fantastic dance with a dance partner.

How does partner dance work?

Partner dancing is two people coming together to make one dance. It's a dance made up of two halves, each with a different, but interconnected role. These two

halves are known as the ‘lead’ and the ‘follow’. Traditionally, these roles would have been danced by men as leads and ladies as follows, but in truth anyone can dance either of the parts. As long as there is one person to take on each of the roles then you can make a partner dance, no matter what gender you are.

Think of it like a conversation. You need two people to converse. One person speaks and the other one listens, that’s how a message is communicated. If both people talk at the same time then no messages are communicated. Similarly, if both people listen at the same time, nothing happens and there is silence; again no message is communicated. It’s not possible to be talking and listening at the same time, at least not for effective communication! The flow of conversation goes from speaker to listener and a message is passed on.

It’s the same with partner dance, except instead of sending our messages through words we’re doing it through physical movement. Each role is crucial to making the other role work, and the flow of energy from one to the other is how they fit together to make up the whole. Neither role is more positive, stronger or in any way more or less superior than the other. They are both different and need the other to exist so they can make up a whole dance. Here’s the basics of what the different roles are:

The lead

The lead is the giver of the energy, or the initiator of the movement. You could think of the lead person as the speaking party in the conversation; leading is directing the movement of the dance. Leads initiate in which direction the dance is moving, or which parts of the body are being used to express movement. Note that just because the lead is initiating the movement it is not a dominant force in the partnership. Without a follow there could be no lead. It is simply one half of the equation.

The follow

The follow is the receiver of the energy given by the lead. Think of it as the listening party in the dance. The follower receives the directional momentum initiated by the lead and uses it to make their own body move and complete the movement for the partnership. In this way, the couple moves as one unit. It's important to recognise that the follow role is not a passive role and not to think of it as *doing nothing*. Following is the active taking in of the lead and using it to complete the dance.

Dancing together

In a nutshell then, 'leading' and 'following' is what partner dance is all about. No one role can exist without the other, that’s why it’s called *partner* dance. There are

many wild, inspiring and amazing combinations that happen within this dynamic. You could dance the same role throughout the whole dance or you could switch roles throughout the dance. As long as one person is leading and the other is following then you are completing the circle and creating a dance together.

The physical dance connection

So, speaking of creating this dance together, let's talk about the dance connection. The physical way you connect with your partner and communicate messages between you is known as your 'dance hold'. As mentioned in the first part, you're already establishing a good practice of your own body and self-awareness; now this is where it becomes important for your partner dancing. Through becoming aware of your own body, you also become more aware of how you are connecting to and interacting with your partner in your dance hold.

Exercise

When you are with a dance partner, notice how you stand together with them. There are some things that commonly happen without awareness of yourself in your dance hold. Check to see if you are keeping your own balance or if you are leaning your weight on to your partner. Are your hands relaxed or are you gripping on to your partner in any way? The more you are aware of your posture and can relax your tensions the more you will be able to connect to your partner in a gentle way. A little more on that later.

For now, I want to mention a few things about height. The beauty of social partner dancing is that you get to dance with so many different people and this brings variety and creativity to your dancing. Great! However, everyone is going to be different and different heights are going to mean different ways of connecting to people.

I encourage you to *be* the height you are, no matter if that's average, tall or short. And *being* the height that you are means standing in a way that is natural for you. What can happen is that the taller person can feel like they need to get down low for their partner and start bending their knees in unnatural or uncomfortable ways. This can put pressure on your knees and lead to knee problems with repeated dancing – not fun! Without awareness you may also find yourself leaning over your shorter partner, inadvertently making them lean backwards away from you – not fun for your partner's back!

On the other hand, if you are the shorter person in the partnership, be aware of the tendency to stand on your tip-toes to make yourself taller. This can lead to difficulty in balancing. If you are a shorter person in a following position you may feel the need to reach your arm very high up to connect with your partner's

shoulder or back, when to do so easily isn't comfortable. Having one arm (and consequently shoulder) unnaturally much higher than the other will tilt your whole body so that, again, you might find difficulty in balancing, or worse, odd back-pain!

So you can see here just how body awareness, mentioned in the first section of this guide, is going to serve you in the long run to dance smoothly and effortlessly when it comes to partner dancing. Find a way to be in your dance hold with any partner in a way that is comfortable for the two of you. It may not look *conventionally* correct, but if it gets your dancing messages communicated and you both feel relaxed and comfortable then it's right and working for you.

Relax to connect to your partner

As mentioned in part one, relaxation is the gateway to letting flow happen in your dance, and it is also a crucial part of connecting with your dance partner in your dance hold. Whatever type of hold you choose to have, closed (a dance hold which is close together with touching torsos) or open (a dance hold which is standing further apart from your partner but still connecting with your hands), you will be communicating the dance together through your physical connection. This physical connection, whether through the whole torso or through only a hand hold, is the line of communication which is communicating the dance energy (or movement) between you. A tense dance connection means more effort in trying to understand what is being communicated. If the message is trying to come through a tense body it's like trying to understand a radio signal through static. It can be understood, but there's more effort involved. You want to be expending your energy dancing not trying to send or understand the communication. Once you bring awareness to how you connect in your dance hold, you can consciously improve the flow of your movements by releasing the tensions in this hold. You are able to see (or feel) the partnership in terms of movement of energy. This leads to more spontaneity, improvisation and playing off each other in a fun and playful manner.

Find your groove together first

When you take your partner and walk out onto the dance floor take your time to get into the groove of the song with them first. You want to make sure that you start together, to give yourself the best chance of having a connected dance. It sounds basic, and it is, but if this fundamental step is missed then you've already started without connection. In a sense, you haven't actually started to dance *with* your partner. You're not yet in sync with each other and moving to the music *together*. Sophisticated moves sure are totally fun to do, but the very basis of any move that *feels good* together is that if *feels connected*; the lead leads and the follower follows in a way that feels great for both of you. And ALL moves, from the tiniest of weight shifts to the fanciest of the lot only feel as good as they are

connected. If you're looking to create a partner dance with as much awareness and mindfulness as you can, then this step is vital.

Exercise

So get this great connection from the beginning of your dance. Connect in with how this music is making you feel, as explained above in section 2. Find the beat, because this is the 'home base' for both of you. When you're both feeling and moving to the beat *together*, you've started your dance *together*. Start small. Do a simple move, like a shift of weight from one leg to the other, in time to the music. Give it a little time to make sure you actually are doing it together before you start doing bigger moves and you and your partner will get in sync right from the get-go. Once you're feeling like you're both on the same page you're ready to start getting in to some more energetic, fancier moves.

Connections beyond the physical

Before I finish I want to touch on the notion of connecting to your partner in ways that extend beyond just the physical dance hold. Although another complete topic in itself, I believe this aspect of dancing increases your connection not just to your dance partner but the whole dancing room. Dancing with a partner without the physical dance hold is enormously fun. It increases awareness beyond physical touch and extends your connection to others in much subtler ways. There are creative things you can do to be connected to your partner without actually touching them. Below are a few examples of dancing together without the dance hold but leading and following visually. You can incorporate these next two exercises into your partner dancing at any time. This is a taster, or reminder, of ways you can feel part of your partnership without being stuck to them like glue.

Exercise

Imitation: When see your partner doing a dance move and you're inspired to do the same thing, go ahead and copy them. It could be the same footsteps or a way they're moving their shoulders. Whatever you see is fun. When doing the same moves together the energy of that movement is amplified and is a great way to feel connected. When you copy a move your partner is doing, they know you are inspired by them and that increases the connection between you.

Exercise

Call and response: This is where one partner does a move and then the other does a move in response. Could be the same move or a different one, doesn't matter. One person moves at a time, so without touching your partner do a move and once you have done it stop moving and wait for your partner to respond. Once your partner has seen your move and done something in response, then you respond to them, and then they to you, on and on. This way your moves can build

upon one another and take you into all sorts of unplanned creativity. You both get a real sense of making up a story in the dance together.

So finally, here are the main ideas about bringing awareness to your partner dancing:

- Partner dance is like a conversation where the messages are sent via leading and following
- When you relax to connect to your partner your communication will be much more effortless
- Take time to get in sync together from the very start for a really connected dance

A final word

Whether you've just started partner dancing or you've been dancing for some time, bringing awareness to these three fundamental areas is a journey that can go deeper and deeper. Bringing awareness to any aspect of your life is about practising and seeing incremental change over time. Your dancing will shift in subtle but profound ways and through implementing these awareness exercises you will find yourself flowing more and more effortlessly in your dancing.

I wish you many happy hours on the dance floor.

-Helen Cheney