

# Have You Hugged Your Dance Partner Today?

Welcome to the World of Anna Botelho  
Posted on June 12, 2009

I think the hardest part about partner dancing is the “partner” part, not the “dancing” part. Not to say that dancesport isn’t physically challenging – the sport continues to get faster and tougher in the physical sense. Ballroom dancers have to be strong, flexible, fit, sensual, expressive, tough, balanced, and in great cardiovascular shape. They are challenged to the max in every physical sense.

But I still think the hardest part of ballroom / social partner dancing is maintaining a working relationship with a partner. This seems like it should be relatively easy compared to the gymnastics you have to do, but it has several common pitfalls...



**1. What it feels like to you is not what it feels like to your partner.** Certain physical actions that might feel fine to you like raising or lowering your arm early, leaning backwards or stiffening your shoulders might feel awful to your partner. Many times people are inadvertently affecting their partner without realizing it. This becomes a source of argument as people start to blame each other for doing it “wrong” without realizing that they are part of the problem.

**Easy Solution:** Avoid the words “You’re doing it wrong”. I think there is no sentence out there that is less helpful. If you want to try to fix what’s going wrong, try the words instead, “How can I help you to...” For example, if you feel like your partner is too far away from you, “How can I help you to end the pattern closer to me?” There is probably something you are doing that is blocking your partner from coming closer – by phrasing it this way you two can work together to find a solution.

Mention what you are feeling so the other person can become aware of how it feels to you. As I said, what it feels like on one side of the partnership can feel entirely different on the other side of the partnership.

If you use the words, “When you do X, I feel Y. Instead, if you could do P then I would feel Q.” I know this sounds like cheesy relationship therapy talk (because it is). But trust me; ballroom dancing is just like couples therapy – or couples therapy gone wrong if people don’t communicate clearly!

If you really must say that they are doing something “wrong”, be specific and kind. Give a compliment first, and then say, “If you could not lower my arm until beat three, that would help me to finish my turn first”. People can accomplish specific items, and this can keep the critique from turning into an argument.

**2. Take positive action and assume the best.** Your dance partner, 99% of the time, is trying their best (if they aren’t... then maybe consider a new partner). You have to remember that they are not \*trying\* to make mistakes, forget the pattern, lead you into walls, or do that annoying thing that you’ve told them not to do. Why would they try to mess up? No really, most people are trying to get it right, but just can’t be perfect at everything all at once.

**Easy Solution:** Try to practice only one thing at a time. Say one of you has a hand squeezing problem. Try practicing one whole hour focusing only on not squeezing each other’s hands to death. Neither of

# Have You Hugged Your Dance Partner Today?

you are allowed to comment, complain or focus on anything else. Do not allow yourself to point out the other mistakes they are making – unimportant! They are trying to fix one thing at a time. Be patient.

This brings us to a very important point – you can only fix yourself. And there is always more to fix about yourself, so focus on that, and allow your partner the space and time to fix themselves. For the most part, having one's partner constantly pointing out the various things one is doing wrong only makes one defensive. Defensive people do not learn or improve very quickly. Avoid making your partner feel attacked! Their dancing will get \*worse\* not better. If you really feel the need to point something out, it should be phrased with the above communication tips.



For the most part, I allow my teacher / coach to offer my partner criticism. That is why we pay them to do so. We do this for two reasons – the teacher is more experienced and can offer corrections in the right sequence. Imagine that you were learning French, and you knew some words but could barely string together a sentence. Since you were just starting, your grammar and conjugation is very limited. However, your French partner, when trying to listen to you, keeps cutting in and correcting your pronunciation of “r”s and the particulars and the past tense. All of this further frustrates you and confuses you, because you can barely put a sentence together in the first place, let alone think of all these little details! On the other hand, an experienced French teacher would ignore the mistakes that are normal for the level, and correct the most important things that need to be fixed first. You cannot fix everything at once, and a good teacher chooses wisely the most important thing to be corrected so that future progress will be smoother. When a nagging dance partner cuts in with lots of other corrections, it can derail the student from focusing on what's important.

Further, the dance teacher is an impartial judge. By allowing the judge to make the corrections, it helps to keep the partners united. This seems like a sort of trivial detail, but human nature is not always kind. When the partners

start to critique each other, it is difficult for them to feel safe around each other. They cannot safely lead and follow with trust, and they feel judged by the other person. It is usually best to leave the judging to the judges and teachers, and make your partner just that, your partner.

**3. Don't imitate the big boys and girls!** Believe it or not, many “pros” demonstrate very bad examples of how to care for your partner. You will frequently see pros fighting on the dance floor during practice, storming out of a room, screaming at each other, etc. Or the less dramatic examples, but equally insidious – in the middle of a step one partner will disdainfully shrug the other partner away and just walk off.

I must say, it is incredibly hard to live the professional ballroom competitor's lifestyle. They are physically, mentally, and financially stressed constantly. There is a lot of pressure to perform well and win with all your students watching. All this stress means that many pros practice poorly by letting their egos interfere with their progress. Pro partnerships mix business with social life (and sometimes romantic life!) This mixing can create a lot of pressure, and when the two aren't getting along after hours / days/ months / years of traveling, practicing, and performing together, they can treat each other quite poorly. Many pro partnerships stick together for years after the partners hate each other because it is too important to continue financially / business-wise together. This means that pro partnerships frequently set a bad example for students on how to treat your dance partner.

# Have You Hugged Your Dance Partner Today?

In short, do not imitate the big boys and girls. I see younger couples sometimes directly quoting their teacher's rants to each other. You don't need to do this to be cool! You don't need to treat your partner badly to be a top competitor!

**Easy Solution:** Instead, proper care of your dance partnership can result in a much longer partnership, which can mean greater success on the dance floor and a lot more learning.

**Summary:** Take positive action – bring your partner flowers. Or a cookie. Maybe a card. Or a hug. Or just remind them how much you appreciate dancing with them. This sounds cheesy, but a good dance partner is your most precious possession. It is easier to find someone to marry than someone to be a full-time dance partner with. If you have a good one, take care of them the way you would take care of your most prized possessions. Because of all those possessions are much more easily replaceable than that person who allows you to take them in your arms, who trusts you to lead / follow and dance with them.

So, have you hugged your dance partner today?

Be kind to each other and see you on the dance floor.

