

1. Dressing Impractically.

Clothing -- Contradance is a very active aerobic dance form. You will be moving more-or-less constantly for 10-20 minutes for each dance sequence, so you will get warm and, consequently, sweat. Clothing that is tight, restrictive or overly warm is likely to get uncomfortable very quickly. You will notice experienced dancers dressing in response to this – women in sun dresses or light skirts (that whirl up during circular figures), women and men in shorts, and men in kilts, utili-kilts and skirts (which also whirl up during circular figures). Bike shorts under skirts can be comfortable. There are lots of options that will leave you drier and more comfortable if you plan ahead a little bit.

Shoes -- Also, it's important that shoes be soft-soled and clean to protect the surface of the floor. Jazz-shoes, ghillies, ballet shoes and other kinds of dance-friendly shoes can be found in stores (especially those that cater to square-dancers) or on-line. Many dancers take comfortable, supportive shoes, like athletic shoes, and have them re-soled for dancing at a shoe repair shop: they can grind down the sole and put dance leather on the bottom. Others like to dance in bowling shoes. If you're going to be dancing very much, good dancing shoes are a good investment. You can step the equivalent of several miles of walking in an evening of contradancing, and doing that in the wrong kind of shoes can be like hiking several miles in the wrong shoes – painful for you and also destructive to the dance floor.

If you're dancing in shoes you've worn on the street, it's important to use a stiff brush (usually provided at the dance) to brush off small bits of grit or sand that might be clinging on them -- these little bits add up to a considerable amount of abrasion on the finish of the dance floor.

2. Skipping the Beginners' Workshop.

If you've shown up at your first dance too late for the beginners' workshop (or, if this is

a festival where the dance isn't preceded by a beginners' workshop), there's no way of undoing it, but plan to attend at your next opportunity. If you haven't yet gone to your first dance, plan to be there several minutes before the workshop is scheduled to start. Workshops are usually taught by the evening's caller, who will teach the most common basic figures, and give you some idea of how he or she will call those figures as the evening progresses. This basic instruction gives you a real leg up on the night – you're not nearly as much of a beginner after attending the workshop as you would be without it.

3. Waiting To Be Asked To Dance.

Remember middle-school dances? Your first contradance can feel a lot like being back in middle-school, either sitting around the wall waiting impatiently for someone to notice you and come over to ask you to dance, or trying to get your courage up to ask someone else to dance when you don't know anybody (this dynamic has a lot to do with Stupid Thing #4 actually). However, contradance isn't like a middle-school dance. This is social dance, and a partner is your “ticket” to the dance – you can't dance without one, but you won't be dancing only with them. Also, traditionally, you don't dance with the same partners twice in a row (some don't dance with the same partner twice in an evening), so being a partner once in the evening doesn't have that baggage of romantic interest or commitment we had in middle-school dances.

Experienced dancers will frequently look close to them when picking partners, so being on the floor (as opposed to sitting on a chair at the side of the room) will substantially improve your chances of being asked to dance. (Dancers tend to assume that those sitting on the side are resting, although some will ask sitters if the standing dancers are already all partnered up). It's also quite acceptable in the contradance communities for women to ask men to dance. If you know you want to dance with a particular partner, and you've sat out a

dance, you can even move yourself toward that intended partner during the final chord and applause at the end of the dance sequence to be available for asking or just ask them.

Some experienced dancers are also afraid of asking strangers to dance, but a smile and inquiring glance with your hand up will usually be sufficient to let them know what you have in mind.

4. Sticking to Beginner Friends.

Coming to your first contradance can be a little scary. There are lots of things going on, lots of new people (some of them dressed rather strangely), and they are doing things that seem rather strange. It's very normal and natural to want to cling to your friends, even if your friends are total beginners like you, even if you're both female.

What makes this a Stupid Thing is that there are things you need to learn to have a successful contradance experience, and your beginner friend doesn't know any of those things. There's even a chance that your beginner friend is a slower learner than you are – in fact, contradance isn't for everybody, and it may be a total mismatch for your friend (even if it's a very good match for you). As you learn how to perform a figure properly, you learn how to be in the correct place, facing the correct direction, with the correct hand in the correct position to meet your partner, and it helps reinforce that correct learning if your partner is also in the correct place, facing the correct direction with the correct hand in the correct position to meet you, and that's much more likely to happen with an experienced partner.

The alternative is to be a “*zipper couple*.” That's the couple that has the dance functioning properly in front of them, and a bit confused and maybe falling apart behind them because they are leaving each set of neighbors a little lost, confused and behind the count moving on with each progression. Zipper couples aren't having much fun, the couples they are dancing with aren't having

much fun, and the couples behind them trying to get things back together aren't having all that much fun either.

Contradance is a social dance form – you dance not only with your partner, but with everybody else in your set. And there is a community aspect to contradancing – people don't usually stay with contra if they don't like meeting new people and welcoming them to the community. You will probably run into a few rude, snobby or boorish people along the way, but they are by far the exception. If your beginner friend is dancing in the same set you are (and is of the other gender), you will end up dancing together as neighbors, so you will see each other even if you aren't partners. And, after a night or two of dancing, you'll be experienced enough that you can dance with your similarly-skilled friend if you want to. By that point, you will have already made passing friendships with many of the experienced dancers, and you might find you like spending time with them as you can see your other friends at other times than just dances.

Same-gender Beginner Couples

A word about same-gender beginner couples – they have some unintended and unavoidable consequences you should consider before forming one. First, the positions in contra are gender-linked – there is a men's part and a women's part. These gender linkages are centuries old and have survived all this time because they are useful. There are no gender cops on the floor, and you're not going to be arrested for dancing the other gender's position, but it remains a relatively rare occurrence to see someone doing so (Note: For people in the North East it is not such a rare occurrence). If you're just wanting to dance with your same-gender friend for the clingy reasons mentioned above, but intend to dance your own gender's position once you learn your way around, you need to know that the other gender's position dances certain figures differently (particularly the swing), so your experience will not be totally transferable to the other position when you get there.

If you intend to regularly dance the other

gender's position, it would be better for you to do so with an experienced partner of the same gender for all of the reasons mentioned above and this additional one – as your new neighbors come to you, they aren't going to instinctively know which of you is dancing which position just by looking, and if neither you nor your partner are in the correct place and time (direction, hand, position), it can make that first figure of that progression very confusing, which will add to your confusion and make the experience much more difficult – in other words, you're more likely to be a *zipper couple* with a same-gender partner who is also a beginner.

5. Sitting out Dances.

This is something to be cautious about, particularly at the start of the evening. Usually, callers will begin the night with easy dances (and will design their beginners workshops to teach the figures of the first dance or two to make them easier), and then move on to more involved and challenging dances as the evening progresses. Sitting out a dance early in the evening means you won't get the practice doing the figures you've already learned, and may also mean not getting the instruction on a new figure that will recur later in the evening.

Of course, if you're worn out or dizzy and need to sit out, by all means sit out. Just pay attention to the instruction that's going on so you'll have some idea of what to do when you join the dance again and that new figure is called again.

6. Getting Too Fancy Too Quickly.

There are many different ways to dance the basic figures of a contradance. Some folks like to do them with lots of extra spins, twirls, bounces and other fancy stuff; they feel these flourishes make the figures more fun and more challenging. Other folks like to do them in a more straightforward fashion. Either way works, so long as both parties to the fancier version want to do it the fancier way, and both of them are up to getting the fancier version done safely and correctly in

the available time. Learning how to count (discussed further below) will help make clear what that available time is.

7. Tolerating Bad Behavior from Other Dancers.

This really isn't a stupid thing to do as much as it's a byproduct of being an inexperienced dancer. Sometimes (but rarely), you may run across a dancer who will be overly familiar to a greater or lesser degree. Occasionally, someone will interact with you on the dance floor in a way that is painful (because the figure is improperly done) or that makes you uncomfortable. With all the bodies on the floor whirling around each other in close proximity, some inadvertent contact that you wouldn't expect from a stranger is bound to happen, most of it clearly accidental and unintentional.

However, if you think the contact was intentional, or that another dancer has done something inappropriate, please let the dance organizers know who it was and what was done when you are done with that dance. They will know if others have complained about that dancer, and can keep an eye out to see whether this is part of a pattern of behavior, or just an isolated incident. If the behavior was criminal (yes, you can commit a felony on or beside the dance floor without others necessarily noticing), then it is appropriate to involve the police to address the situation.

This kind of conduct is so rare that you can dance for years without experiencing it, and many dancers never have and never will. However, should it happen, please know that talking to the dance organizers, even about something that seems minor and petty, is the first and best thing you can do.

8. Not Asking Questions.

If you don't understand a figure (or know it by name), it's better to ask another dancer than to repeatedly get it wrong and get frustrated about it. Good times to ask are: while couples are lining up before the dance is taught, during the dance when you and

your partner are “out” at the top or bottom (note that this time is much shorter if this is a “double progression” dance), or immediately after the dance. You can even ask a question verbally during a swing or other figure that gets you close enough to someone long enough to ask the question and then get an answer.

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11. Expecting Perfection

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by Blain Nelson and other contributors on Wikibooks.com

1 through 8

Preface

The purpose of this document is to help beginning contradancers have a positive experience so that, hopefully, more of them will choose to stick with the dance form and build the contradance community. It seeks to do so by pointing out some of the common patterns beginners fall into that lead to less-than-satisfactory experiences and the decision to leave the dance form too quickly.

While the title labels these as *Stupid Things*, that's as much to create a snappy title as it is a fair description. They don't require much stupidity in practice, and many intelligent people have done them. The reasons they are chosen are quite understandable, but they remain counterproductive and rather easily avoidable if given the information this document intends to present. Some of them are listed to create a list of ten things, rather than because they're stupid, and those sections still have information useful to the beginner.

Oh, and there are more than 10 things listed. This really doesn't break anything. You'll see.

The *Stupid Things* are presented in the approximate order they will occur in the dance experience, with the first two taking place before the dance starts, and the rest happening during the dance.

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9. Not Counting.

Almost everything in contradance is built around an eight-bar musical phrase (2 counts to the bar), and most figures take two, four, six or eight bars to carry out. Generally you will step once per count. If you are doing an eight-count figure, it's usually a good idea to transition from that figure to the next starting on count six. For example doing lines of four down the hall and back up could be mentally counted like "one-two-three-four-five-six-turn back, one-two-three-four-five-six-circle up".

For some figures, especially those that either don't change your position or that leave at the point you started, it's good to apply the rule "better never than late." That means that it's better to skip the figure entirely rather than doing it and finishing late, so you aren't able to start the following figure on time. Examples would include the balance in a balance-and-swing, or the gypsy in a gypsy-swing combination.

It can take a few progressions to figure out exactly what the count should be, but the music will usually help you remember when the eight-count phrases are done, and the caller can point out the places where the counting gets tricky.

10. Leaving too early.

There are two variants of this Stupid Thing: leaving an evening of dancing too early, and deciding that contra isn't for you and leaving the entire dance form too quickly.

Regarding the former, it's usually best to come to the first few dances planning to stay for the whole evening. Staying for the whole evening will provide you with more experience in dancing, and you'll remember more of what you learned at the next dance. If you have an unavoidable reason for leaving before the evening is over, then dance until you need to leave and have fun (it's better than not dancing at all).

Regarding the latter, avoiding the other Stupid Things will help you to avoid this one. Contradance does take some learning, including some trial and error. No dancers,

whether beginning or experienced, are perfect... and every experienced dancer was once a beginner. As you continue dancing, you will learn more about which variations you can use to make the dancing work better for you, and how to recover when a figure (or a whole progression) gets messed up. You'll also get to know and become friends with more of the dancers. If you're really feeling clumsy and awkward and like you're messing things up for other dancers, talk to the dance organizers about this and get their perspective. You might just be having normal learning-curve experiences that everybody has, or you might just not be a good match for contra. Dance organizers can be useful in distinguishing which applies to you.

11. Expecting Perfection.

As elsewhere in life, perfection in contradance is an elusive goal. This is because it's impossible, so it's very good at eluding those who seek it.

You're not going to be perfect right off the bat, and nobody expects you to be perfect. Experienced dancers have experienced beginners many times before, and even experienced dancers goof up sometimes. Most dances will have a figure or two that is very forgiving (like a circle or a swing) which gives you a bit of time to get to where you're supposed to be and be ready for the next figure after you've blown something.

Now, when I said "nobody expects you to be perfect," that means that expecting anybody else to be perfect is a waste of your time. The solution to someone else's mistake is the same as the solution to your own mistake -- move on as quickly and smoothly as you can to the place that you can catch up with the dance and then you'll be fine -- except that it's a little more important that you smile or laugh and make it clear that you're not offended (even if you are, a little). Consider it a chance to get over yourself just a little bit so you can get back to enjoying the dancing, which is always a good thing.

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