A FREE GUIDE

CONTACT IMPROVISATION: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Eight short chapters, with exercises you can try alone first.

Miami Contact Improv, miamicontactimprov.com

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Read the chapters in order the first time. Before you try any exercise with a partner, read the safety and consent page at https://miamicontactimprov.com/safety-and-consent. This guide is not medical advice.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT CONTACT IMPROVISATION IS

A dance with no steps, built on curiosity. Start here if you have never seen one.

No steps to learn

Most dance forms begin by handing you a vocabulary. You count the beats, copy the shape and repeat it until it looks right. Contact improvisation hands you none of that. Two or more people stay in touch at a point on the body that keeps travelling, and they find out what happens next by feeling it happen.

Martin Keogh, a contact improvisation teacher and the author of *Dancing Deeper Still*, writes on his site that the form has no steps and is "a dance form based in curiosity". That is a fair description of what a first class asks of you. You bring questions, and you keep asking them.

What a dance feels like from the inside

Try a small version now. Stand beside a friend and rest the back of one hand against their shoulder blade. Ask them to walk slowly across the room while your hand stays in touch. You are not leading and you are not being led. Your hand notices the shoulder turning, your wrist adjusts, and your feet take a step you did not plan. That chain of small answers is the whole form, scaled up and given more body parts.

Why that is good news if you are new

There is no syllabus, so you cannot fall behind on one. A dancer with twenty years of practice has better habits than you do, but not a longer list of moves. What experience buys is skill at noticing weight, comfort with being off balance and a quicker, kinder way of saying no. You start building all three on your first evening.

It also means you can arrive with no dance background. People come to a jam from every kind of movement history, and from none. The only thing nobody can do for you is show up.

Nobody owns it

Contact improvisation began in 1972 around the dancer Steve Paxton, and it has no governing body, no certificate and no brand. The history page tells that story and what contact improvisation is gives the plain definition, so this guide does not repeat either.

The practical result is that nobody can mark your dance wrong the way a ballet teacher corrects a position. Someone can tell you that you hurt them, and you listen. Keogh describes the form as open source: teachers pass on ideas, and each dancer finishes the form through what they do with it.

What it asks of you

It asks for attention and for honesty. Attention goes to the person you are touching, and to the floor under both of you. Honesty means saying so when you want to slow down or stop. Beginners find the second one hardest and most useful, so it has its own chapter, saying no well.

Try this: carry one question

Pick one question before your next practice and carry it through the whole session. Where is my partner's weight right now? What happens if I go half as fast? Where am I holding my breath? You do not need to answer it. Notice when you remember it and when you forget it. The forgetting tells you something too.

Try this: two minutes standing

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your eyes open and soft. Do nothing on purpose. Your body makes tiny corrections to stay upright, and those corrections are the raw material of the dance. Watch them for two minutes. Dancers call this the small dance, and you can do it at a bus stop.

How to use this guide

Read the chapters in order the first time. Each takes about ten minutes, and each has one or two exercises you can try alone before you try them with anyone. Read safety and consent before any exercise with a partner. If you would rather read offline, the free PDF holds all eight chapters.

CHAPTER 2

THE FLOOR IS YOUR FIRST PARTNER

Solo floor work, breath, release and the smallest falls. A win in ten minutes with nobody else in the room.

Start with the smallest fall

Falling gets a chapter this early because it decides how safe everything after it is. A dancer who can meet the floor calmly can take risks with a partner. A dancer who braces against it gets hurt, and tends to hurt the partner too. You can learn the basics alone, on a clean floor, in about ten minutes.

The idea of beginning with tiny falls, alone, before any partner work comes from a progression Martin Keogh teaches and has written up on his site. The exercises below are our own versions, so read his as well.

Try this: settle into the floor

1. Lie on a mat or a clean, non-slip floor and let your limbs go wherever they go. You are already supported, and nothing needs holding up.
2. Watch your breath for a minute. Then scan for tension in the jaw, the shoulders, the hands and the backs of the knees. Let each one go heavier, one at a time.
3. Come up onto hands and knees. Lower one hip toward the floor and let yourself tip the short way onto your back. Then try the other side. Keep the drop to a few centimetres.
4. If anything pinches or jars, make the movement smaller or stop.

Landing is a transfer of speed

Every fall builds a little speed, and a landing has to pass that speed on to something. If you stop dead, all of it goes into one small spot, usually a wrist, an elbow or the tailbone. If you let the body keep travelling, with a roll over the shoulder or a slide along the hip, the speed spreads across a wide area and can even carry you up into sitting or standing.

That is why a straight arm makes a poor brake. A wrist is a small joint, and it cannot absorb a whole fall. Let the big surfaces, the thigh, the hip and the back of the shoulder, meet the floor first, and keep the arms soft and travelling with you.

Try this: three falling shapes

Stand on a mat, clear of walls and furniture. Fall a very short distance in each of these ways, and repeat each a few times before you move on. The idea of separating these three shapes is also from Keogh's progression, and the images are ours.

- **Fold.** Crease at the hips and knees, like a coat sliding off a hanger, and settle into a pile.
- **Roll.** Keep a rounded, toned shape, like a ball, and let it travel across the floor in one direction.
- **Stretch.** Extend along one long line, like a plank tipping onto its edge, and meet the floor along the whole side of the body.

Afterwards ask which shape was easiest to recover from and which one made you tense. Most beginners favour one and avoid another. Give the avoided one a few more goes, always from a small drop.

Try this: soft and toned landings

Repeat the same small drop twice. First let the body go loose and heavy, so the landing is quiet and you stay where you land. Then keep a little tone, so you roll on and travel. Compare how each one feels when you try to stand. The toned version is the one that lets you rise without pressing your hands into the floor.

Before you add a partner

Falling next to someone comes later. Read safety and consent and the blog post on how to fall without getting hurt first. Keep your nails short, take off rings and watches, and tell a partner which way you are heading.

Stop when you feel sharp pain, as opposed to effort. This guide is not medical advice. If you have a condition that affects your joints, back or balance, talk to a clinician and to whoever leads the session.

Try it again tomorrow

Five minutes is enough. Lie down, follow the breath, roll and drop, and finish with one fall in each shape. The floor stops feeling like something you land on and starts feeling like something you can ask for help.

CHAPTER 3

SHARING WEIGHT

Collapse, lean, find a mutual centre, and let a shared balance fall. Why bones beat muscle.

What sharing weight means

When two people share weight, part of your body's weight rests on them and part of theirs rests on you. Neither of you lifts the other. You each lean a little, and the contact point holds both loads. The glossary defines weight sharing in a line, and the blog post weight sharing explained walks through one example. This chapter is the practice.

Bones carry weight, muscles steer

A body stacks its weight through the skeleton into the floor with very little muscle effort. A lean on a partner follows the same rule. Their weight should travel through their bones to the floor, not hang from your gripping shoulders.

Use this test. If your shoulder, neck or forearm is working hard to hold the contact, you are holding it with muscle. Ease off until the work moves into your legs and feet. The contact gets lighter and lasts longer.

Martin Keogh collects dancers' notes on support, starting from the dictionary sense of bearing weight from below. One dancer in those notes describes watching others as a way of supporting them. We would add that the person at the edge who is paying attention helps keep the room safe, and that counts.

Try this: back to back

Sit back to back with a partner on the floor, spines touching. Agree who starts. The first person leans a few degrees and the second one receives the lean. Swap. Notice what your partner's spine feels like and how their breathing moves it.

When that is easy, press your backs together, walk your feet in slowly and rise together to standing. Go slowly. If either of you wobbles, sit back down and try again.

From collapse to lean

An exercise progression Martin Keogh teaches, in his notes on falling, starts with two people collapsing their weight onto each other and ends with a pair falling together through space. The middle steps are the useful ones. Here is our version.

1. Start by resting. One person sits or lies and the other rests a small amount of weight on them, with permission, in a place you both agreed on.
2. Stand side by side with hips and shoulders touching. Lean toward each other until the contact holds you both. The lean is small. If your partner stepped away, you would both notice.
3. Find the middle. There is a point between you where the pair balances, a mutual centre. Move toward it and away from it by changing how much you lean, a few centimetres at a time.

This light weighting is what makes the contact mobile. A heavy lean pins you in place, and a light one lets you travel.

Try this: the leaning walk

Stay shoulder to shoulder, lean slightly, and walk across the room together at the slowest pace you can manage. The contact point travels while neither of you can leave without the other noticing. Swap sides, then swap who sets the speed. Talk afterwards about where the weight felt balanced and where it felt like work.

Letting a shared balance fall

Later, once the lean feels easy, you can stop guarding your own balance and trust the pair's. The two of you tip off balance together, and your steps keep the pair upright. Keogh's description of this stage ends with the observation that "instability leads to greater mobility".

That is why being off balance is the aim and not a mistake. The steps you take to keep the pair standing are the dance. Beginners should try this slowly, on a mat, after the earlier practice, with an agreement to stop whenever either person says so.

When it hurts

Say "lighter" or "less" as soon as you feel pressure on a joint. Agree on those words before you start. A partner who hears them and eases off is a partner you can learn with. The next chapters build on the same idea, and chapter 5 covers what to say when "less" is not enough.

CHAPTER 4

SENSATION AND SPACE

Feel before you move fast. Widen your gaze. Learn to move backwards without bumping into anyone.

Sensation comes first

Speed looks like dancing, so beginners often rush toward it. Before speed there is sensation: pressure, warmth, the texture of a sleeve, the tilt of a partner's ribs. Dancing from sensation means you let those details decide what happens next.

Martin Keogh ran regular focus jams in Boston in the early 2000s and posted the closing-circle notes, including a jam on the step from sensation into momentum. We suggest you test the idea yourself. Dance one slow minute where speed is only allowed to appear if the contact asks for it, then one minute where you start fast, and compare how much control you felt.

Try this: slow hands

Work with a partner and agree where the contact is, for example a palm on a forearm. One of you moves their arm slowly and the other keeps contact. Stay with these questions for a few minutes. Where does the skin shift? Where is the warmth? Where does the pressure travel?

Do not speed up until you can describe what you feel. When the contact itself asks for more speed, give it only as much as it asks. Then swap roles.

A wide, soft gaze

Much of what keeps you safe in a room is peripheral awareness. Pick a spot in front of you and let your eyes go soft until you notice the edges of your vision. Wiggle your fingers out to the side and see how far back you can still catch the movement. Now walk across the room like that, with the whole space inside your attention.

The documentary *Fall After Newton*, which follows the form's first eleven years, describes the senses learning to work in every direction so that any point on the body can take part in a dance. Keogh quotes it on his page about spherical space. You do not need to understand it to try it. Soften your gaze and the room gets bigger.

The back of the room

The area behind you is the biggest blind spot, and it is where most beginners collide. Keogh opened one of his Boston focus jams on the back space with a line worth keeping: "We don't have blind spots, only places we are not willing to look". The invitation is to look and to feel there on purpose.

Try this: the over-the-shoulder spiral

1. Stand with your knees soft. Look over your left shoulder and let that look pull your head, ribs, hips and feet around until you face the way you were not facing.
2. Do it again to the right. Keep it slow, and keep your feet under you.
3. Add a partner behind you, with a hand on your back. They say "I'm here" so you know where they are. Spiral toward them slowly and notice how much of the room your back can feel.

Moving backwards safely at a jam

Warm up before you try it, because dancing into the back space with cold muscles is where twists happen. After that, three habits keep you and the people around you out of trouble.

- Look first. Turn your head over your shoulder before your body follows.
- Go slowly. A backwards step at walking pace is plenty.
- Keep a feeler. Leave the back of a hand, a forearm or a shoulder blade extended and soft, so you touch a wall or a person gently before you meet them.

If you do bump someone, stop, check in and thank them for the information. The first jam walkthrough covers what the room expects, and chapter 5 covers what to do when a collision shakes you.

CHAPTER 5

SAYING NO WELL

How to decline a dance, end one early, mention an injury, and hear a no without taking it personally.

Why no belongs to the dance

Contact improvisation asks your whole body to be available to someone else. That only works if you can also withdraw. Every dancer, however new, can say no to any dance at any point, with no explanation owed. Please read safety and consent for the rules of the room, and the blog post on consent and saying no mid-dance for a longer example.

Martin Keogh's essay 101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation works through situations a dancer meets, including not being warmed up, dancing around an injury and an insensitive partner. He writes that even after four decades he is still learning this. If a teacher with that history says it stays hard, a beginner can forgive themselves for finding it hard too.

Declining a dance

Someone looks at you, offers a hand and waits. You do not want to dance with them right now. Say it before the dance starts, because it is far easier than ending one.

- "Not right now, thank you."
- "I'm resting this one."
- "Not this time."

Pair the words with your body. Smile if you want to, keep your hands low and your weight back, and look at them while you speak. You do not need a reason, and a reason invites a negotiation.

Ending a dance early

You can stop at any moment, including halfway through a movement. Start with the body. Lighten your weight, soften the contact and make some space between you. Most partners read that straight away.

If they do not, use your voice and use it plainly. "I'm going to stop here, thank you." Then step away and take a break at the edge. You do not have to stay to explain, and nobody in a well-run room will ask you to.

Naming an injury or a limit

You can protect yourself before a dance begins. "My left knee is sore, so no weight there." "I'm not warmed up, so slowly, please." "I'd like to stay low to the floor tonight." You are not obliged to share a diagnosis. Give the partner the part they need to dance safely with you.

Hearing a no

When someone declines you, say "thank you" and move on. Do not ask why. Do not look wounded, and do not try again a minute later. A no tells you about that person's evening. It does not rate you.

The same goes mid-dance. If your partner lightens the contact or steps back, follow them. The quickest way to earn a yes next time is to take a no without any fuss.

Try this: say it out loud

Alone, say five of the sentences above aloud, in a normal voice. Say them while standing, then while moving. Many people discover they have never said "no, thank you" without apologising. Practise until you can say it without a rush of words after it.

Try this: yes, not yet, no

Pair up with someone who knows the exercise is a drill. One person holds out a hand. The other answers with the body only. A yes steps in and takes the hand. A not-yet holds still and lightens. A no steps back and lowers the hands. Run each answer three times, then swap. Afterwards, tell each other what made the answer easy to read. Clear signals look a lot alike from one person to the next, and you can borrow the ones you saw.

CHAPTER 6

YOUR FIRST JAM

What a jam is, how to arrive, how to ask for a dance and how to leave one.

What a jam is

A jam is an open session where people practise contact improvisation together. There is no teacher and usually no music. You dance with whoever is willing, rest at the edge when you want to, and leave when you are done. The jams page has the full definition and the Miami listings, and your first jam, step by step walks through an evening hour by hour. This chapter gives you what to practise before you go.

Arrive for the circle

Many jams open with a short circle. Someone states the ground rules, newcomers can say hello, and anyone may add a boundary or a note. It is the easiest moment of the evening to be included, and the one latecomers miss. If you arrive early you also get time to change, find the water and pick a corner of the floor to warm up in.

Say it is your first time if you feel like it. The room tends to meet you accordingly.

Asking for a dance

Dances usually begin with eye contact and an open hand rather than a speech. If you want to be clearer, a short question works: "Would you like to dance?" Then wait. A pause is a legitimate answer, and so is a no. If the answer is yes, start slowly, with one small point of contact, and use the weight-sharing skills from chapter 3.

Leaving a dance

A dance ends when either person ends it. Slow down, lighten the contact and part. Many dancers finish with a nod, a hand on the chest or a short "thank you". Then walk to the edge, drink some water and watch for a while. You do not owe anyone a second dance, and you do not owe anyone an explanation either.

Focus jams

Some jams pick a single theme for the evening, which is called a focus jam. Martin Keogh ran regular focus jams in Boston and kept notes on the format: a theme introduced with a quote or a question, an evening of dancing, and a closing circle where people say what they noticed. Dancers can follow the theme, argue with it or ignore it. If you are not sure whether a jam is a focus jam, ask the host.

Try this: rehearse your two lines

Write down the sentence you would use to ask someone to dance and the sentence you would use to end one. Say each aloud three times. They can be as short as "Would you like to dance?" and "Thank you, I'm going to rest." Having the words ready takes the fear out of the first ten minutes.

Try this: the edge hour

At your first visit, spend the first ten minutes at the edge. Watch two or three dances all the way through. Notice how they begin, how weight moves, how they end, and what the dancers do in the pauses. Pick one thing you would like to try. That is a perfectly good first evening, and it is allowed to be the whole evening.

Where to go

If you live in Miami, the Friday jam page has the weekly details. The jams page lists the sessions this site has verified. Both explain what to bring and what to expect, so this chapter does not repeat them.

CHAPTER 7

THE INNER CRITIC

Un-weighting, simplicity and staying inside your own limits when the voice in your head gets loud.

The voice in the room

Almost everyone arrives with a running commentary. It compares you with the dancer across the room. It plans the next move before the current one has finished. It apologises when you step on a foot. Martin Keogh made a short video called The Train of Self-Doubt, a fair name for how one worry pulls the next one behind it.

You will not switch the voice off, and you do not need to. The aim is to stop giving it your weight.

Un-weighting

Un-weighting is a skiing term. A skier unweights by easing pressure off the skis for an instant so they can turn. Keogh used it as the theme of one of his Boston focus jams and posted the notes, where he extends the word from limbs to the weight of the day and of the self-critic. We find the same idea useful in a plain form. Easing off effort lowers the stakes, and a dance with lower stakes allows odd, personal choices.

Try this: set the voice down

1. Lie on your back. Notice where your limbs press into the floor. Lift an arm a centimetre off the floor and hold it there, lighter, then lower it.
2. Do the same with a leg, then with your ribs. The trunk is harder to lighten than a limb, so take your time with it.
3. Name the voice with one word, such as Comparing, Planning or Apologising. Imagine setting it on the floor beside you, the way you would set down a bag.
4. Stand up and take one small walk without picking it up again.

Simplicity

Keogh also ran a focus jam on simplicity, and his notes suggest it suits newcomers well. The reason is practical. A simple task leaves less room for the critic to talk. If you only have to do one thing, there is little left to judge, and a plan for the whole dance has no place to live.

Try this: one simple thing

In your next solo practice or warm-up, choose one thing and repeat it. It could be a slow roll, a lean, or eye contact at the start of a dance. Repeat it ten times. The tenth version is never the same as the first, and the changes are your material. When a thought starts planning the next move, say "planning" under your breath and go back to the repetition.

Staying inside your limits

A more energetic partner can pull you past what feels right. Staying true to yourself inside a duet is a skill in its own right. Keogh's focus jam notes on staying true are about honouring your own feelings and limits while you dance with someone. In practice you can say "slower", "less weight" or "I'm going to sit this one out". Chapter 5 gives you the words, and this chapter gives you the permission.

The critic and the limit are different voices. The critic says you are not good enough. The limit says you have had enough for now. Learn to tell them apart, set the first down and obey the second.

CHAPTER 8

WHAT PROGRESS LOOKS LIKE

Qualities of a seasoned dancer, not tricks. A rubric you can use after any jam.

No belts, so look at qualities

Contact improvisation has no ranks. A dancer who can lift and spin is not further along than one who can stand still and listen. To see progress you have to look at how someone dances. Martin Keogh judges his teaching by whether dancers can take in more sensation and more risk, and whether they dance "less with their 'ideal' and more with their partner".

What seasoned dancing tends to look like

Keogh posted a minute of a twenty-minute duet and listed what he noticed in it, at Terminus Stations. Here are the same qualities in our words, with one of our own at the end.

- **Soft tone.** The body is firm enough to carry weight and loose enough to answer.
- **No terminus stations.** Every movement flows into the next, and nothing comes to a full stop at the end of a phrase.
- **Hands that map.** Hands read the partner's shape and do not steer it.
- **Receiving impulses.** The dance comes from the exchange between two people, with nobody pushing a plan into it.
- **Honest sound.** A breath, a hum or a word reports what is happening. A sound that performs adds nothing.
- **Easy stillness.** Pausing is as comfortable as moving.

What your own progress feels like

It rarely looks like a new move. It feels like falling without tensing, like saying no earlier and with less drama, like staying with a clumsy moment until it turns into something, and like hearing a no without flinching. Some weeks you will go backwards. That happens to everyone, including people who have danced for decades.

Why tricks mislead

A lift or a fast spiral is easy to see, so people mistake it for skill. A dancer can pull off the move and stop listening to their partner in the process. When a dance is going well, an observer often cannot tell who started what, because the impulse came from the exchange and not from either person.

For an honest check, ask two questions after a dance. Could my partner have said no easily at any point? Could I have? If the answer to either is unclear, the dance had a problem however it looked from outside. If both answers are yes, the dance was probably better than it felt, even if it was slow and small.

Try this: three notes after a jam

Within an hour of leaving, write three short notes. One thing you noticed in your body. One moment you said yes or no and it went well. One question you want to carry into next time. Keep them in a notebook. After a month, read the pages in order. The change is usually clearer on paper than in memory.

Try this: watch and note

Choose any clip in the video room and watch two minutes. Write down what you notice about weight, hands, pauses and endings. Then watch it again and look for one quality from the list above. You are training your eye, and your eye teaches your body.

Where to go next

The keep practising page covers what to do between jams, including the weeks when nothing is running. Fundamentals is a taught series that starts from the ground, and classes and workshops explains how to judge any class. Come back to this guide whenever a chapter stops feeling obvious. They are written to be read again.

CREDITS

FURTHER READING

Much of this guide builds on ideas and exercise structures taught by Martin Keogh, a contact improvisation teacher and author. His book *Dancing Deeper Still: The Practice of Contact Improvisation* (Intimately Rooted Books, 2018) is the place to go for the long version. Find the book on martinkeogh.com.

All the prose here is written for this site, with short credited quotations and links to his pages. Keogh has not reviewed or endorsed this guide.

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