

# **Beyond the Buzz: Why Ecstatic Dance Safety Demands More Than Good Intentions**

The first time I stepped into an ecstatic dance space, I felt a wave of relief. Here was a room where no one expected you to talk, where the music carried you, and where movement was your only language. For someone who had spent years in corporate meetings and structured fitness classes, the freedom was intoxicating. But as I became more involved, I started noticing the things that weren't part of the welcome speech. The way a facilitator's glance could shift the mood of the room. The quiet pressure to stay in the circle even when your body said leave. These were not failures of the practice itself but gaps in how we think about ecstatic dance safety.

Ecstatic Dance UK has grown rapidly, drawing people from all walks of life who are seeking a non-verbal, drug-free space to move and connect. The promise is simple: a safe container where you can be yourself. But the reality is more complex. Safety in a space like this is not a switch that flips on when you walk through the door. It is something that must be built, maintained, and repaired by the community every single session. And that work often falls on the most vulnerable participants.

## **The Illusion of the Safe Space**

The term "Safe Space" is used widely in conscious movement communities. It suggests a bubble where harm does not happen. But anyone who has spent time in these circles knows that harm does happen. It might be a microaggression during a partner exercise, a facilitator who oversteps a boundary in the name of guidance, or a participant who ignores a clear non-verbal cue. The idea that a space is inherently safe because it is called a Safe Space can actually make people less vigilant. It can discourage reporting, because reporting feels like breaking the vibe.

Filipe Bastos, who has written extensively on these dynamics, points out that the very structures meant to protect participants can become sources of harm when they are not examined. Informal power accumulates in facilitators who are charismatic, experienced, or simply louder than others. Without a clear Code of Conduct that is enforced consistently, that power goes unchecked. A Code of Conduct is not just a document to sign at registration. It is a living agreement that must be referenced, modeled, and upheld by everyone, including the people running the event.

## **Naming the Unspoken: Power Dynamics and Consent**

Power dynamics in ecstatic dance are often invisible because the culture emphasises equality. Everyone is on the same floor, moving to the same music, breathing the same air. But the facilitator holds the playlist, decides when the music stops, and often guides the opening and closing of the circle. That is power. And power without accountability is a recipe for harm.

Consent in this context is more than asking permission to touch someone. It is about reading the room, checking in with yourself, and recognising that a person who is in a trance state may not be able to give meaningful consent. This is where the concept of Informed Consent becomes critical. Participants need to know what they are stepping into: the style of facilitation, the type of music, the presence of partner work, and the level of physical contact that might occur. Providing that information before the event, not after, is a basic safety measure.

I once attended a session where the facilitator asked everyone to close their eyes and then guided us through a breathing exercise. A few minutes in, she started walking around and placing her hands on people's shoulders. No one had consented to that. The assumption was that the group trust was high enough. But for some participants, that touch broke the experience entirely. They left feeling violated, unsure whether to speak up. That is a failure of [ecstatic dance safety](#) that could have been prevented with a simple verbal check-in before the exercise began.

## **Mental Health First Aid and Trauma Informed Practice**

Many facilitators are not trained to handle the emotional intensity that can surface during a dance. A powerful track can trigger a memory, a movement can unlock a somatic experience, and before you know it, someone is sobbing on the floor. That is not a problem in itself. The problem is when no one knows what to do next. Mental Health First Aid training gives facilitators and volunteers the tools to respond to acute distress without making it worse. It teaches grounding techniques, active listening, and the importance of not pathologising normal emotional responses.

Trauma Informed practice goes a step further. It asks facilitators to consider that every participant may have experienced trauma, and that the dance space can inadvertently re-enact patterns of control, abandonment, or violation. A Trauma Informed approach does not mean treating everyone as fragile. It means building structures that reduce the likelihood of harm. For example, offering an alternative to the closing circle for people who do not feel comfortable sharing. Or allowing participants to opt out of any exercise without having to explain why.

## **Accountability Beyond the Individual**

When harm happens in an ecstatic dance community, the default response is often to blame an individual. That person was not respectful. That facilitator overstepped. But this ignores the systemic conditions that made the harm possible. Collective Harm is a term used to describe situations where the community itself, through its norms, silence, or lack of enforcement, enables harm to occur. The question then becomes not just "What did that person do?" but "What did we allow?"



Accountability in this context requires more than a private apology. It requires a process that involves the harmed person, the person who caused harm, and the wider community. This is where Restorative Justice practices can be valuable. Instead of punishment or exclusion, Restorative Justice focuses on repairing the relationship and the community. It is not always appropriate, especially in cases of serious abuse, but for many common conflicts it offers a way forward that does not leave everyone feeling bitter or defensive.

The Circle, a format used in many ecstatic dance gatherings, can be a tool for this kind of work when it is facilitated with care. But the same circle that creates connection can also create pressure to conform. If someone speaks up about harm, the group may unconsciously punish them for breaking the positive vibe. Peer Support networks within the community can help mitigate this by providing a separate, confidential space for people to process their experiences without fear of judgment.

## Practical Steps for Safer Dance Spaces

So what does good ecstatic dance safety look like in practice? It is not a single checklist but a set of ongoing commitments. Here are a few that I have seen work well in communities that take this seriously:

- Publishing a detailed Code of Conduct before every event and reviewing it aloud at the start of each session. Make sure it covers physical contact, photography, and the role of facilitators.
- Offering Facilitator Training that includes modules on power dynamics, consent, and trauma awareness. Training should be ongoing, not a one-time workshop.
- Appointing a dedicated Safeguarding person for each event who is not the main facilitator. This person is available to talk to anyone who feels uncomfortable, and they are trained to handle disclosures confidentially.
- Creating a clear reporting process that is advertised on the website and at the venue. People need to know who to talk to and what will happen after they report.
- Conducting regular check-ins with the community about the emotional climate. This can be done through anonymous surveys or facilitated group conversations outside of dance time.

## **The Role of Community Guidelines and Wellbeing**

Community Guidelines are only as strong as the culture that upholds them. If the guidelines say "respect everyone's boundaries" but no one intervenes when a boundary is crossed, the guidelines are meaningless. Bystander Intervention training gives participants the skills to step in when they see something that does not look right. It might be as simple as moving closer to someone who is being hovered over, or asking a friend if they want to take a break. When bystanders act, the entire community becomes part of the safety net.

Wellbeing is not just the absence of harm. It is the presence of conditions that allow people to flourish. In an ecstatic dance context, that means paying attention to the music volume, the temperature of the room, the availability of water, and the presence of quiet spaces where people can rest. It also means recognising that wellbeing is collective. When one person is struggling, it affects the whole group. Building a culture of mutual care takes time and intention, but it is the only foundation that lasts.

## **Looking Forward Without Naivety**

Ecstatic dance is a beautiful practice. It has given me moments of pure joy and connection that I still carry with me. But I have also seen the cracks. I have seen facilitators burn out because they were expected to be therapists, healers, and DJs all at once. I have seen participants leave

because they did not feel heard. And I have seen communities fracture because they did not have the tools to talk about harm when it happened.

The conversation about ecstatic dance safety is not an attack on the practice. It is an act of care. It is saying that this thing we love is worth protecting, and that protecting it means being honest about its flaws. It means training facilitators in Mental Health First Aid, writing real Community Guidelines, and creating systems of accountability that do not rely on the goodwill of a single person. It means admitting that good intentions are not enough.

If you are part of an Ecstatic Dance UK community, ask yourself what safety means in your space. Is it just a word on a flyer, or is it a practice you uphold every week? The answer will tell you a lot about where your community is and where it needs to go.