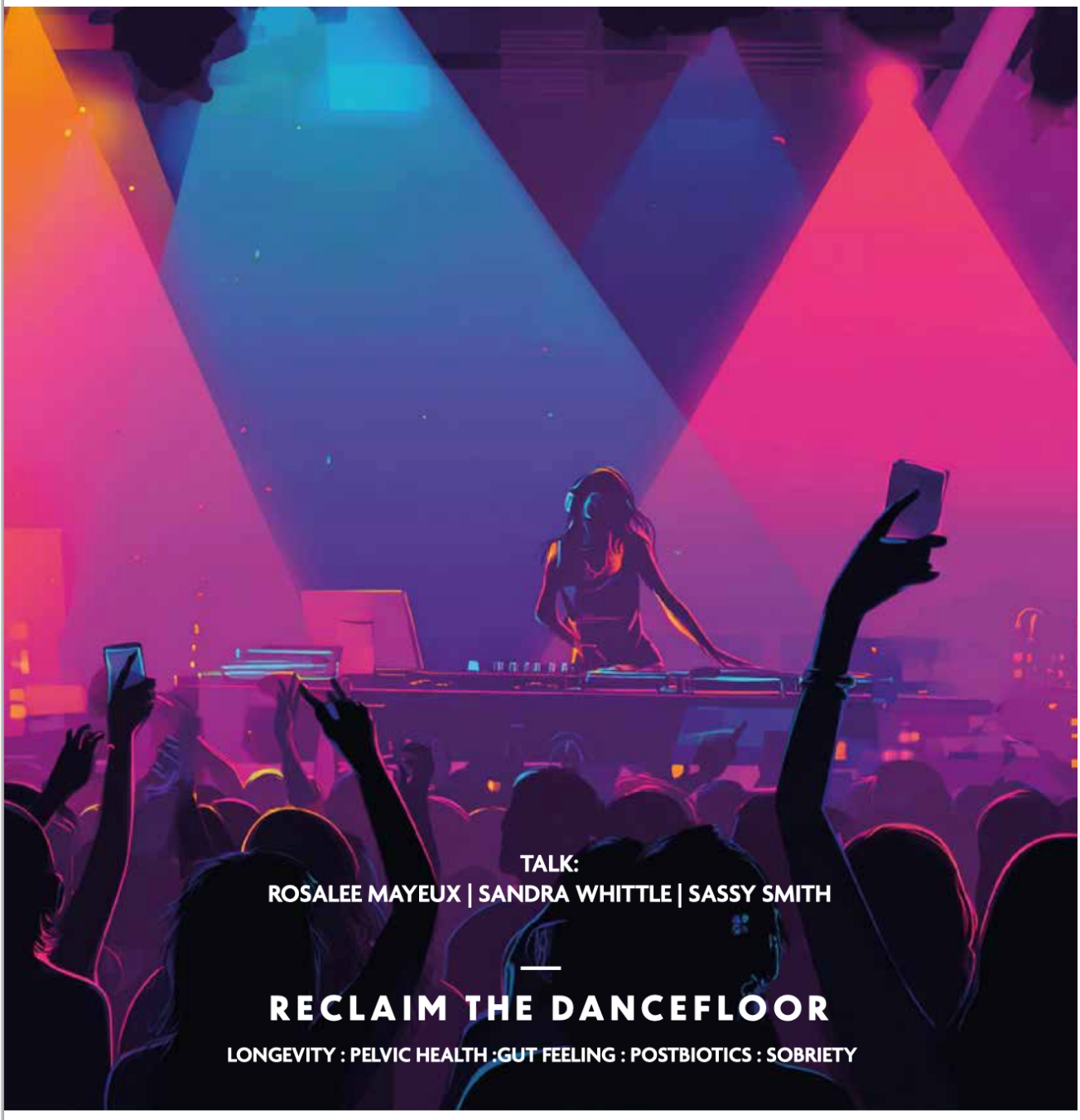
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TALK:
ROSALEE MAYEUX | SANDRA WHITTLE | SASSY SMITH

RECLAIM THE DANCEFLOOR

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DOING CONFLICT DIFFERENTLY

WORDS:
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We often feel disconnected from our partners when a conflict arises. That discomfort can cause us to feel wounded. We might think that because our partner disagrees with us, they're dismissing us and our perspective. You might feel unheard, but are you being gaslighted or just disagreed with?

If you're deeply upset by your partner's responses to you when you express a different opinion, the problem may lie in how the two of you engage with each other when you're in conflict. Maybe you and your partner need to be "doing" conflict differently.

How Do You and Your Partner "Do" Conflict?
What do each of you do when a disagreement arises? Do you try to persuade the other person to see the situation your way? If you fail, do you insist they're "wrong" and that their perspective has to change? When you believe conflicts can only end with someone winning and someone losing, conflicts are likely to be hurtful and destructive. But if you see conflicts as a way to become closer to your partner despite your differences, conflicts can be productive and lead to a better relationship.

Conflict avoidance can be as painful and problematic as a conflict that's a battle for winning over the other person. It might feel better at first to ignore a problem, but in time, the lack of resolution can gnaw away at you. And if you or your partner, or both of you, have a pattern of conflict avoidance, you're missing out on something important. You could take the opportunity that conflict brings and use it to achieve greater emotional intimacy and security in your relationship.

Close the Gap
If you and your partner can learn to accept each other's differences, you can close the gap between you two.
Let's say you're upset about a situation you see as a crisis, and your partner shrugs it off. Maybe your partner is simply disagreeing with you about what happened and why. Maybe they perceived the situation differently and don't understand why you're upset. For example, they may see someone else's behavior stemming from being ignorant of some social norms you take for granted. You might be angry that this person violated those norms, while your partner sees their behavior as mildly annoying but nothing more. To close the gap between you two, you can ask your partner to try to adopt your perspective for a minute to better understand why you're so irritated. Then, you can adopt their perspective briefly to see why they think the situation isn't a big deal.

Acknowledging differences in perception can be painful because it can lead to a sense of disconnectedness. You may not end up seeing through the same lens, but the two of you might agree to be more sensitive to each other's feelings rather than saying, "I don't get why you're upset" or "It's nothing to be upset about"—or "I can't believe you're shrugging this off! What's wrong with you?"

The next time you and your partner disagree about what you see as a crisis, your partner could say, "It doesn't bother me, but I can see it bothers you," and "Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?" You can say, "I know it doesn't bother you, but it bothers me. Can you hear me out and try to sympathize with me?" Validating each other's feelings, perceptions, and responses, even when you have different ones, can help both of you feel closer to each other.

Differences, Acceptance, and Sacred Listening
Can you and your partner accept the differences between you that become obvious during conflicts? If you both practice sacred listening, that is, disciplining yourself to truly hear your partner express themselves uninterrupted, you may come closer to accepting each other as you are. Having someone give you their undivided attention, not speak except to ask for clarification, and encourage you to continue expressing yourself enhances feelings of affection and connection. Simply being heard can help you feel accepted.

Even so, it can be painful to realize you haven't persuaded your partner to adopt your viewpoint. As tempting as it might be to "correct" each other rather than listen patiently, the two of you should try to hold back. When the first person finishes talking, the partner can reassure them that they have been heard. Then, when it's their turn to speak, they can address anything their partner said. Take turns, not interrupting each other, and be patient. If a partner interrupts, the other partner should say, "Wait, let me finish, please, and then I want to hear what you have to say." Simply letting each other express feelings and perceptions, however long it takes, can help each of you feel heard, respected, and accepted despite your differences. Feeling this way, you can carry on a more productive conversation and let pleasure and relief wash over you as you realize you're not battling each other. You might even do some collaborative problem-solving together.

What to Do When You Feel Vulnerable
If you feel very vulnerable when facing a conflict, can you acknowledge that to your partner while expressing that you want to find common ground with them? Maybe the two of you can agree on how to "do" conflicts despite your differences. Could you agree to doing sacred listening? Could you use humor to cut the tension, avoiding sarcasm directed at the other person? Joking about yourself can be an excellent way to get your partner out of a defensive mode or help them remember your sensitivities and your quirks. It takes confidence to laugh at yourself and admit that maybe you're a little too uptight or anxious about certain things. Similarly, it takes confidence to admit you tend to avoid conflicts by not speaking up when you disagree with your partner, pretending that you think something's "no big deal" when that's not the case.

If your partner truly respects you, they'll respect your feelings and accept your imperfections. They'll let you be the one to joke about your sensitivities rather than teasing you when they know it bothers you. They'll listen attentively instead of half-listening while trying to figure out what to say next to win you over to their point of view! By talking through your differences, showing respect during conflicts, and doing your best to accept each other as you are, you will feel closer as a couple even when you don't share the same perceptions, perspectives, and sensitivities.

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