When it comes to Dungeons & Dragons, my partner is a walking rulebook. Need to calculate a stat? She’s got you covered. Trying to fudge the length of a spell duration? She’ll call you on it. Don’t know which dice to roll? She knows. From combat to lore, she’s a font of knowledge, and she’s meticulous in her record-keeping. If you’ve forgotten anything — loot properties, earned XP, how much gold’s in the kitty — she’ll have it down. It’s amazing.

Roleplaying, on the other hand...roleplaying doesn’t come instinctively to her. My partner is shy by nature, and content to be the quiet member of the table, declaring actions when necessary, but otherwise supporting the rest of us by doing math and taking notes. Our current campaign, however, is an RP-heavy city setting, and though we’ve been having a blast, my partner has felt that she’s not contributing much. The other night, a few hours before our scheduled session, she asked me, with no small amount of trepidation, if I’d help her get better at roleplaying.
As if I’d say no.

The thing I love most about tabletop RPGs is that they offer something for every kind of player. Folks like me are drawn to the structured, collaborative storytelling, while analytical types dig into bending rules and devising strategies. But while the story-inclined tend to be fine asking for help with mechanics, I’ve noticed a general reluctance among number crunchers in learning how to roleplay. If that applies to you — I get it. Roleplaying is weird. It feels silly. Making up entertaining stories in front of your peers is way more intimidating than working out percentages on a nonjudgmental piece of paper. While I can’t make roleplaying less scary, I do have a few ways to help you ease into it. I’m not going to go into how to write a backstory, because I’m willing to bet you’ve already got that figured out, from her time of birth to her preferred blend of tea. Instead, I’m going to focus on getting you off the page and into the banter.

The first thing you need to do is stop thinking about your character as something you need to become. Counter-intuitive, I know, but that’s a big mental block for many. Don’t worry about talking in character yet. Before the session ever starts, get comfortable talking about your character as if she was in a book or a movie. This creates a buffer zone between yourself and the character. She’s no longer someone to inhabit; she’s someone in a story, there for you to pick apart. Forget about needing to act as your character. Just talk about her.

When I asked my partner to describe her character in that way, she thought for a moment, and said, “She’s tall.” I’m sure there was more, but I stopped her right there. Seemingly minor details like that are a great place to start. Okay, so your character’s tall. How tall? Strikingly tall? Abnormally tall? Was she tall as a kid, too? Did the other kids make fun of her for it? Does her height make her feel powerful, or is she self-conscious about it? What actions can she perform better than others (climbing trees, helping others reach things)? Is her tallness ever a hindrance (short doorways, wearing disguises)? Roleplaying games provide tons of material for backstory — ancestral origins, religions, moral leanings — but it’s
easy to get lost in that stuff without ever expanding upon how those traits might make a character behave. If you’ve got pages of backstory but no idea how to speak as your character, you need to go back to basics. Something as simple as the way a character looks and moves can reveal so much about who she is. If you’re having trouble getting a feel for what makes your character tick, start on the outside, and work your way in.

While knowing your character well is a big part of being able to play them, there’s also the risk of making things too complicated. After we’d spent half an hour digging into her character’s qualities, my partner’s creative streak shifted into mild panic. “I still don’t know what I’m supposed to say,” she said. “Like what she’d say to you, or to people in town, or — ” I intervened. She was still operating in a spreadsheet mentality — respond to X with Y. I hate to say it, RP-phobes, but there’s no class table for this. Trying to anticipate every possible thread of conversation before it happens is crazy-making, and won’t help you at the table.

Trusting yourself to react in the moment is the hardest thing about roleplaying, by far, and there’s no way to learn it quickly. The key thing to remember is this: no matter how long you’ve been roleplaying, you will always make mistakes, and you will always think of a better response after the fact. Solid roleplaying requires accepting that you might say something stupid, and choosing not to care. That’s easier said than done, I know, but the more you do it, the more painless that leap becomes. As one of my online gaming buddies likes to say, “Learnin’ in the doin’.”

If the idea of opening yourself up to crashing-and-burning scares you, talk in third-person at the table, just like you did during your character prep. Instead of saying “I pick up the spiked mace,” say “my character picks up the spiked mace” (or use her name). This doesn’t interfere with the flow of the game and can help you feel less self-conscious if you do something silly or make a mistake. It’s not you who fumbled, it’s a character in a story! You can graduate to first-person pronouns when you feel confident enough to do so. And don’t get hung up on witty comebacks, either. Making up conversations on the spot is tricky. Trust me,
for every clever thing that’s come out of my mouth, there have been a dozen others that fell flat. If you can’t think of the exact words your character would say, keep using third-person narration as training wheels. State that your character flies into a drunken rage, or recites the Litany of the Pompous Paladin, or whatever she would do in that situation, without actually improving it. Dialog is fun and adds flavor, but until you’re comfy with that, concentrate on being able to imagine out loud.

I advised my partner along those lines as well, and she brought up a really good point. She said, “But you guys go so fast. You meet an NPC, and you bounce off each other, and I don’t have time to think about what to say. I can’t jump in.” And she was totally right. Our rogue and I are not shy when it comes to RP, and we’re playing characters with big personalities. We weren’t allowing much space for a quiet player whose character is the strong, measured type. What my partner needed was an assist.

I know this is tough advice, but if you’re in a group of RP-happy players, tell them that you want some help. If roleplaying is what they love best, and you express a desire to learn, they’ll be delighted to lend you a hand. For me, on the not-shy side of the table, being aware of my group members’ strengths and weaknesses makes me a better team player. Good roleplayers know how to give someone an in, and will make an effort to do so. This might involve tossing you leading questions (“I don’t know! Sir Pantsalot, how do you feel about going to the Archlich’s tea party?”), or even just holding back a response for a few seconds, giving you the chance to speak up.

You might feel like your group members are carrying you — and you’re right, they are. But it’s no different than you helping someone set up a character sheet for the first time, or reminding them about what dice to use. Keep in mind that some players feel just as awkward about never remembering how to level up as you do about roleplaying. A free exchange of skills is what makes a roleplaying group click, just as class balance keeps your adventuring party alive. A warrior wouldn’t
hesitate to ask a cleric for healing, right? So don’t despair if you aren’t a master thespian right off the bat. Your group already values you for your other skills, and your willingness to develop a new one makes you rock all the more.

And whatever else you do, never forget the most important rule of all: have fun.

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