

EMPOWERING  
*the feminine*

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BELLY DANCING FOR body AND spirit

*Jeanne Ainslie, MSc*



*The Oriental dance, or the belly dance, enjoys a long tradition as a Middle Eastern or African folk dance. Although its origins are uncertain, one theory is that belly dancing was performed to strengthen women's abdominal muscles for childbirth. >*

Today belly dancing is being taught and performed by women of all ages as a non-impact form of exercise. Its many physical benefits include improved posture, toned arms, strengthened back muscles, and improved digestion.

But beyond its physical benefits, belly dancing is also a powerful way for women to embrace their femininity, gain self-esteem, and heal from pasts damaged by sexual abuse and neglect.

Not only does belly dancing energize and heal the mind and spirit, it gives the body an excellent cardiovascular workout and increases strength and flexibility. Many belly dancers experience a greater sense of well-being, better body image, and improved self-confidence.

*“Through belly dancing, women can learn to accept their bodies and discover self-expression, fulfillment, and joy.”*

### VARIETY OF STYLES

I had the pleasure of interviewing Elisheva, also known as Lisa Allen, who teaches belly dancing in Vancouver. She

### CHOOSING A CLASS

- > Check out community centres, continuing education programs, or belly dance studios in your area.
- > Find a teacher who is able to instruct you in technique, posture, balance, and isolation.
- > Choose a basic class to begin.
- > Sign up for two classes a week so you'll be able to learn the moves and memorize them quicker.
- > Select a class that keeps you moving continually if you're dancing to aid weight loss.
- > Wear comfortable dance or exercise clothing; you can dance in bare feet or soft dance shoes.

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explained the different styles and their roots. Egyptian Oriental style is done in the traditional style. The dancers don't interact with the audience due to traditional religious restrictions. Their movements are very elegant and graceful.

Turkish Oriental style is based more on its Roma roots. Roma dance is lively, conversational, gregarious, and upbeat, with more hand gestures and a faster rhythm.

When dancing, Elisheva enjoys improvising. She says that improvisation allows her to express her individuality, femininity, and sensuality—not her sexuality. To those who view belly dancing as erotic, she says, “They haven't really seen it, or taken the time to truly understand its cultural roots.” Belly dancing celebrates the sensuality and power of being a mature woman.

Through dance, Elisheva teaches her students how to translate whatever they are feeling into movement. If they're relaxed, their movements become that much more fluid and evocative, and have much more depth of emotion. The most difficult thing for her students is learning how to let go. “Most of my students are very self-conscious of their body image,” Elisheva says. “I encourage them that it's okay to let loose, to be who they are.”

### HEALING EXPERIENCE

For Ann, a cancer survivor, belly dancing provided a liberating spiritual experience and also a healing experience. Ann contemplated learning how to belly dance, but it wasn't until she was in her 50s that she overcame her fear of revealing her stomach and enrolled in classes. It took her a year before she felt comfortable exposing her stomach, but when she did, she described it as “freeing.”

Ann missed the chance to dance with her fellow students when they

performed for family and friends, as she had just undergone her second radical mastectomy. When she and her partner decided to get married, she made plans to belly dance at their wedding. She made her own costume and bought some beautiful silk for a veil. She told the groom about her entertainment plans; he was supportive but left her alone to practice.

### CELEBRATION OF HEALTH

Ten days before the wedding, Ann underwent breast implant surgery. She worried that she wouldn't be able to lift her arms when dancing at the reception. To the guests' surprise, her daughter performed a Highland dance, her son played the tambourine, and then Ann performed a belly dance.

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When Ann's CD didn't work, her son accompanied her on tambourine. Although her music didn't work, Ann's arms did as she shimmied in front of her guests and ended by dancing for her husband.

Ann credits belly dancing with restoring her self-confidence. “It made me feel good about myself and not worry about how I looked,” she says. “Especially for me at that time in my life, it was a celebration of my own health.”

Ann's belly dancing at her wedding is an inspiring story of feminine empowerment and courage. Through belly dancing, women can learn to accept their bodies and their limitations, and in the process, discover self-expression, fulfillment, and joy. **a**

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*Jeanne Ainslie, MSc, is an experienced editor and published writer. She is the author of the novel A Country Girl (Xlibris, 2008). Jeanne lives in White Rock, BC.*