

The Therapeutic and Empowering Benefits of Belly Dance (Raqs Sharqi) in Women's Health

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Abstract

This article synthesizes recent academic research and therapeutic applications to explore the multifaceted benefits of belly dance (*Raqs Sharqi*) for women's health. The practice is established as a **low-impact physical activity** that offers specific somatic benefits, including **pelvic floor strengthening** (An & Kim, 2017) and improved outcomes for **breast cancer survivors** (Boing et al., 2017). Furthermore, its unique movement vocabulary has been utilized in trauma-informed therapy, where rhythms such as **staccato pops and locks, fluid figure eights, and vibratory shimmies** facilitate the processing of emotions, body reclamation, and self-soothing (Eish-Baltaoglu, 2020). Psychologically, belly dance fosters **enhanced self-esteem, positive body image**, and a reduction in **depressive symptoms** and **Social Physique Anxiety (SPA)** (Liu, Soh, & Lu, 2025). Culturally, the dance is framed as a healing, ritualistic art form that aids in reclaiming the **feminine identity** (al-Rawi, 2012) and provides an accessible, non-verbal avenue for healing trauma (Eish-Baltaoglu, 2020).

Introduction

Dance, recognized historically as a healing ritual, is a powerful medium for communication, conditioning, and therapy (Kiepe, Stöckigt, & Keil, 2012). The American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defines **Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT)** as "the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual" (ADTA, as cited in Kiepe et al., 2012).

Despite the effectiveness of dance, the practice of belly dance (*Raqs Sharqi*) is often burdened by **negative stereotypes**, which obscure its deep cultural and therapeutic value (Conceição & Gadelha, 2024). This synthesis aims to rigorously examine the evidence of belly dance's benefits, addressing its role in:

1. Promoting physical conditioning and specific health outcomes.
2. Improving psychological well-being and body image.
3. Acting as a therapeutic complement for women with physical and mental illnesses.
4. Framing the practice as a trauma-informed, cultural intervention.

The analysis integrates findings from a systematic review on dance therapy (Kiepe et al., 2012), clinical trials focusing on breast cancer (Boing et al., 2017), trauma-informed therapeutic applications (Eish-Baltaoglu, 2020), and cultural texts (al-Rawi, 2012).

Therapeutic Applications and Trauma Healing

Belly dance is gaining recognition in Expressive Therapies for its potential in processing trauma and facilitating emotional understanding, particularly for women who struggle with verbalizing their experiences (Eish-Baltaoglu, 2020). Trauma often lives in the body, bypassing the cognitive, verbal areas of the brain and requiring a **bottom-up approach** (Wylie, n.d.). Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) is uniquely suited to address this dissociation and somatic memory (Bernstein, 2019).

Specific Rhythms for Emotional Processing

A method developed by Eish-Baltaoglu (2020) utilizes three core belly dance movement rhythms to deepen a client's understanding of their emotions after trauma:

Belly Dance Rhythm	Movement Quality (LMA)	Therapeutic Function
Staccato Pops and Locks	Sudden, Strong, Bound Flow	Helps clients reclaim their body and personal space and process emotions like anger .
Fluid Figure Eights	Sustained, Flowing, Free Flow	Serves as a self-soothing tool ; encourages internal exploration and moving towards comfortable emotions.
Vibratory Shimmies	Rhythmic, Continuous, Supported	Helps clients feel grounded , shake loose areas where they feel stuck (mentally, emotionally, or physically), and reduce self-imposed limitations.

Participants in the study reported that these rhythmic explorations were effective in expressing difficult material and making a healthy shift from distressing to positive emotional states, effectively **bypassing the mind or ego** and accessing the body and spirit (Leseho & Maxwell, 2010).

Physical and Gynecological Health Benefits

The core movements of belly dance—*isolation* and *undulation*—translate directly into measurable physiological benefits:

Pelvic Floor Strengthening

The isolating hip movements (*shimmies*, *figure eights*) specifically engage and strengthen the pelvic floor and deep abdominal muscles. A non-randomized study found that a 12-week belly dance intervention significantly **increased pelvic floor muscle contraction pressure and endurance** ($p < 0.05$) in middle-aged women, positioning it as an effective, non-surgical intervention for **urinary incontinence** (An & Kim, 2017). This strengthening also supports the historical use of the dance in preparation for and recovery from childbirth (Herlyssa et al., 2023; Ismael & Al-Hawaz, 2022; Stewart, 2000).

Core Strength and Back Health

The demanding nature of the torso and hip movements works with the core muscles, which can lead to a more defined waist, **improved posture**, and mitigation of chronic lower back pain (Bencardini, 2002).

Therapeutic Application in Oncology

The pilot study by **Boing et al. (2017)** demonstrated that belly dance is a viable complementary activity for women with breast cancer:

- **Quality of Life (QoL):** The intervention group showed significant pre-to-post improvements in QoL scores, including improved **body image** ($p=0.037$) and **sexual function** ($p=0.027$).
- **Symptom Reduction:** Participants saw a decrease in scores for **systemic therapy side effects** ($p=0.005$) and **arm symptoms** ($p=0.001$), which is crucial given the upper limb involvement in breast cancer surgery and recovery.
- **Mental Health:** The intervention also significantly decreased **fatigue** ($p=0.036$) and **depressive symptoms** ($p=0.002$).

Psychological Well-being and Cultural Empowerment

Belly dance fosters psychological growth by creating a space for identity reclamation, social acceptance, and positive body image.

Body Acceptance and Self-Esteem

The dance community environment fosters **identity formation** and **social acceptance** across diverse body types, challenging Western aesthetic ideals (Mohr, 2019). The practice helps women move beyond seeing their bodies as merely objects and instead as a **vehicle of their minds**, thereby restoring confidence and security (Bencardini, 2009).

Social Physique Anxiety Reduction

A systematic review confirmed that dance interventions significantly enhance **Physical Self-Esteem (PSE)** and reduce **Social Physique Anxiety (SPA)**, with the effects being particularly pronounced in women (Liu, Soh, & Lu, 2025).

Reclaiming the Feminine Principle

Cultural accounts, such as **al-Rawi's (2012) *Grandmother's Secrets***, frame belly dance as an expression of the **feminine principle** and a pathway for women to discover their **inner strength**. It is viewed as a sacred, ritualistic art historically done **by women, for women**, connecting them to the cycles of life and providing a means of healing and empowerment through movement.

Conclusion

Belly dance is a complex and highly effective art form that offers substantial benefits for women's health. Academically, its efficacy is validated across multiple domains: physically, through **core and pelvic health improvements**; psychologically, through **reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms**; and therapeutically, through its application as an accessible, non-verbal method for **trauma recovery** and support for vulnerable populations like **breast cancer survivors**. By prioritizing body awareness, emotional expression, and social support, the practice successfully counters negative cultural stereotypes and provides an enriching path toward holistic well-being and the powerful reclamation of feminine identity.

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