

Belly dancing improves body image and satisfaction

November 18 2014



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Belly dancers are more satisfied with their bodies and have better body image than young women who don't belly dance, new Flinders University research shows.

In a survey of more than 200 Adelaide women, the belly dancers scored

higher marks for positive [body image](#) and lower on measures of [body dissatisfaction](#) and self-objectification than a group of university students who had never belly danced.

A total of 112 belly dancers from two Adelaide dance schools were interviewed as part of the research, along with 101 university students.

Led by Flinders body image expert Professor Marika Tiggemann, the study aimed to determine whether belly dancing fosters a greater sense of connection, or "embodiment", between the body, mind and spirit, thereby leading to positive body image.

"Embodiment refers to the sense of ownership, trust, respect and self-expression of the body," Professor Tiggemann, based in the School of Psychology, said.

"In the Australian context, we found that belly dancing is an embodying activity because it requires focused attention on breathing and torso muscles, as well as strength and flexibility, all of which calls on the dancers to communicate with their bodies," she said.

"Belly dancing also has a strong mental and physical element of being 'in the moment', which is another characteristic of embodiment."

Professor Tiggemann said the effects of belly dance on body image were largely driven by reduced "self-objectification", meaning the dancers didn't view or treat their bodies as objects based on other people's thoughts.

"The belly dancers weren't so focused on external appearance but more the internal experiences and competencies of the body.

"Unlike some forms of dance such as ballet, the belly dancers we

surveyed didn't feel outside pressures to be and remain thin – not only is belly dancing open to women of all shapes and sizes, the belly dancers said they participated because it makes them feel good, not for the gaze of others."

While belly dance is often viewed as an exotic and sexually alluring activity, Professor Tiggemann said she was surprised to find the belly dance group didn't embrace their sexuality any more than the university cohort.

She said further research was required to test embodiment across a wider range of recreational activities and life stages in order to determine the best way and time to use it.

"It may well be that other more mindful activities such as yoga and meditation, which have been shown to reduce levels of self-objectification, body dissatisfaction and disorder eating, may have a more direct effect on positive body image because of their greater focus on internal experience.

"It would also be useful to find out whether there is a critical period in the lifespan that embodying activities need to be engaged in for maximum benefit.

"For example, it might be particularly crucial in adolescence; a time when many Australian girls are currently dropping out of organised sport, often for appearance-based reasons."

The findings, Professor Tiggemann said, highlight the need to encourage women and girls to participate in physical activities that "focus on being in and using the body", such as athletics, hiking or circus skills.

"Importantly, this recommendation represents a positive step, in contrast

to most strategies used to combat [negative body image](#) such as not reading fashion magazines and not comparing yourself to other women."

The study was published in the international journal *Sex Roles* in August.

More information: "Belly Dance as an Embodying Activity?: A Test of the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image." *Sex Roles* October 2014, Volume 71, Issue 5-8, pp 197-207.

link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-014-0408-2

Provided by Flinders University

Citation: Belly dancing improves body image and satisfaction (2014, November 18) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-belly-body-image-satisfaction.html>

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