

Belly Dancing for Pregnancy and Birth

by Corinne L. Casazza

Imagine yourself abundant with child, you look down upon the swell that is your belly and know this new life is ready to make its debut. You are surrounded by all your female relatives, friends, and, of course, your own mother. As you feel the first contractions, all the women create a circle around you and begin chanting, singing, and undulating their abdomens. You join them. These undulations along with hip circles and shimmies lessen the pain of your contractions. You sway along with your sisters, aunts and cousins allowing the sibilants of their voices to mesmerize you; relax you and open you to the surrendering necessary for birthing. This trance-like state, the trust and love of your sisters, and the gentle movement of the dance come together to allow your child to be birthed naturally, easily and with sanctity.

In her book, *Grandmother's Secrets The Ancient Rituals and Healing Power of Belly Dancing*, Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi states “to this date, belly dancing has retained its ritual aspects in many Arab countries. It accompanies a woman throughout the phases of her life: menstruation, wedding, birth, death, taking on a different face according to each event.”

Here in the west, the idea that belly dancing is healthy and beneficial for pregnant women and the labor process is a relatively new idea. In the last few years, the mainstream media including ABC's *Good Morning America*, *Time Magazine*, *Medical News Today* and *The Wall Street Journal* have all reported on the benefits of this ancient dance with members of the medical profession advocating its safety for the mother-to-be and the baby.

Cathy Moore is one such professional. Moore is a mid-wife at Boston's Brigham and Women's hospital who has been introducing pregnant women and birth specialists to belly dancing in her business, *In the Belly of the Goddess*.

Moore was belly dancing at the same time she became a mid-wife. Her dance instructors at *The Goddess Dancing* told her that belly dance had its origins as a birth dance, but her own inner knowingness about the connection between belly dance and birth came from learning to shimmy.

“When I really learned how to get a good hip shimmy going and felt how loose the pelvic floor is, it just clicked that the movement would let babies out.”

On a physical level, women who belly dance understand that it exercises the core muscles and all of the muscles used in giving birth – the abdominals and all the muscles in the hips and pelvic floor.

“What I really like about belly dance as a fitness routine is that in terms of musculature, you get a nice lengthening and strengthening of the muscle as opposed to tightening of the muscle. A lot of exercise we do in our culture is all about tightening and shortening muscle which produces an aesthetic that we have come to think is beautiful in our culture -- really flat strong abs, and so on. In order to let a baby out and grow a baby, your muscles have to lengthen and expand,” says Moore.

Her experience in the delivery room showed Moore that most women needed some training to prepare for labor.

“One of the things I had seen in birthing was that women would really clench all the muscles of the pelvic floor and be counterproductive. To get a baby out, you really need to let go and expand and release. That was an aha moment. I could see that a good

hip shimmy would allow things to loosen and allow the baby into the birth canal and out of the body.”

A curious fact about Moore is that she doesn't have children, so she didn't personally experience birth. She has a lot of experience witnessing birth – what she refers to as “catching babies.”

Since each woman is unique, women's experiences of birthing using dance techniques vary. “Some women have said belly dancing has made a world of difference. Usually a woman's first is her longest and hardest labor, so it's difficult to tell if success is just due to this being a subsequent labor. I had a student who gave birth to her second child and used hip circles in early labor. She found it incredibly helpful and was excited she had actually used what she learned in labor.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum is national belly dance celebrity Suehayla Salimpour. According to Moore, Salimpour had a caesarean section and doesn't give credence to the belly dance/birth connection.

Still, in her pre-natal dance classes, Moore's students report that many of the movements have benefits in mitigating some of the normal discomforts that women experience, especially during the end of pregnancy such as constipation, heart burn and lower back pain.

In these pre-natal classes, Moore teaches belly dance movements that coincide with each of the three stages of labor. The first stage of labor is everything up to the 10 cm mark and deals with contractions.

“I recommend all the slower isolations such as hip circles and figure eights for the first stage. I believe these movements help to disperse the pain. It gives women

something else to focus on and by moving; the pain is not localized in one area, and tends to lessen in intensity.”

Hip movements can be very helpful in positioning the baby’s head correctly into the pelvis. “Any hip movement where the hip is moving up and down vertically like in a shimmy or a vertical figure eight where you’re getting those diagonals –helps with the baby’s positioning because they move the bones of the pelvis and cause the pelvis to flex and open a little, giving the baby the millimeter or two it needs to find a better fit.”

The second stage of labor is the actual birthing process -- 10 cm until the baby is born. “I really love shimmies for the second stage. Shimmies are my absolute favorite movement for pregnancy and birth. I recommend that in between pushes women do a vertical hip shimmy (an earthquake shimmy) nice and loose and at a very relaxed tempo. It’s good because it really loosens the pelvic floor. In between bearing down, I want women to be really loose and relaxed because that really helps with the descent of the baby into the birth canal.”

In stage 3, the placenta is passed out of the body. “The placenta has to detach from the uterus, then move down into birth canal. In stages 2 and 3, belly rolls and undulations move the abdominal muscles in a sequential way which is very helpful in pushing. The abdominal movements really mimic what happens with the contractions. Muscles undulate when the uterus contracts pushing out the baby and the placenta.”

Besides the movement, another important physical aspect of labor is breathing. “If women really practice breathing, they can get into a self-hypnotic state; just trancing out into the movement can be beneficial,” says Moore.

Laura LeRoy agrees. LeRoy is a licensed Dancing Thru Pregnancy® Instructor with over 28 years experience as a professional belly dancer and choreographer. She is the Director of Birthdancing at *Zohar Birthdancing* in Arizona.

LeRoy put her own spin on the Dancing Thru Pregnancy program and calls it Birthdancing. “Belly dance is really a healing body/mind/spirit holistic form of self-expression, health and healing. I felt bringing this into the pre-natal modern world would be of great benefit,” she says.

Breathing is a key piece of the equation for LeRoy. “When you’re able to become aware of your breath and you are in a relaxed and meditative state, the breath enhances that state. You’re in a heightened awareness and not in fear. You’re allowing the moment to unfold as it should, trusting in the moment, instead of being in fear about the future or what’s going to happen next. I don’t know any better way to get to that place than slow, hypnotic belly dance movements.”

LeRoy believes being relaxed, focused and present is the best way to have natural child birth. One way to induce this is through trance-like music; very inwardly focused, very slow and snaky – a taqsim. Dance movements combined with the right music can induce a trance-like state, very relaxed, very focused, very centered.

“In labor a woman is in a moving meditation and as she goes into transition, she enters into a different type of mental state. It becomes very inward. If you’re in the movement, breathing, and have the right soothing music, it’s very powerful and beneficial. I think of teaching Birthdancing as giving something of special value to women for the most significant experience of their life.”

Interestingly, LeRoy didn't have the benefits of belly dance when she gave birth, she used Lamaze. "It didn't work for me at all. It didn't give me the preparation or training that I needed. That doesn't mean some people can't benefit from it. I do think Birthdancing offers a great deal more help to woman in the birthing process. It has such far-reaching benefits. In general the whole vocabulary of movements is beneficial because it teaches the woman how to isolate the different areas of the torso. Most women don't realize they have so many parts in their torso versus one big pregnant belly, but there's the pelvis, diaphragm, rib cage, and all these areas can be isolated to facilitate birthing."

LeRoy began dancing in 1980 and has done extensive research into belly dance, discovering the dance about 10 years after giving birth to her son. "When I learned about this ancient tradition of fertility and birthing dance which we call belly dance (that name is about 100 years old, that's not what it was called in ancient times), I took the liberty of calling it birthdancing, because in my research it was very much connected to birth. That was the original intent of it."

LeRoy studied the books of anthropologist Marija Gimbutas and found *The Language of the Goddess* to be particularly interesting. In various archeological digs, Gimbutas discovered a nature focal society where woman were the center of the society and owned all the property. Fertility and childbirth were paramount to the survival of their community. Artifacts from this society included many fertility symbols and drawings of dances that marked transition points in the lives of women, like birth and death.

“I also noticed there were certain symbols that kept appearing on the pottery and artwork of the time. I found that circles, crescents, helixes, spirals, and chevrons were the primary symbols. They appeared on the largest structures they created, the megaliths, to the smallest handheld fertility symbols.”

LeRoy started seeing the connection between these symbols and the basics of nature – earth, air, water and fire. The way she presents birthdancing is based on these basic shapes and patterns; the movements integrate them all. Figure eights and circles are earthy movements that open the pelvis and position the baby. Water is represented by the rippling and waves of undulations which control and strengthen the abdominal muscles. The pulsing vibrations of shimmies call to mind fire and relax and stimulate the pelvis. Air is represented by the spiraling which pushes and pulls with healing life force energy. The umbilical cord of the baby is a spiral and the movement out of the birth canal is a spiral. These basic shapes and patterns are present in belly dance movements and it’s all in alignment with the natural order of things.

To be aligned with nature during childbirth, a woman must be relaxed, present and in the moment, able to listen to her body and open and surrender to the birthing process. The ancient ritual of belly dancing allows for all of this and the sanctity of new life. What could be more natural, than a group of women encircling a mother-to-be, enfolding mother and child with their love and encouraging an easy, graceful entrance into the world?

For more information on Cathy Moore’s belly dance for pregnancy and birth, visit her web site at www.inthebellyofthegoddess.com. To learn more about Laura LeRoy’s Birthdancing program, visit her site at www.zoharbirthdancing.com.

