Saved by the Belly

After a positive diagnosis, belly dancing boosts self esteem-—at the gut level.

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Twenty HIV positive people stand in a circle in an empty room, toss back their heads and emit a high-pitched shriek. But they feel terrific. The sound, called a zaghareet, is a traditional way of showing appreciation for the Middle Eastern art of belly dancing, and the group members deserve it—they've just aced a 90-minute workshop filled with hip rolls, shoulder shimmies and elaborate hand gestures.

For two years, their HIV positive instructor, Dorothy Field,* has been teaching positive people, mostly women, to belly dance their way toward reclaiming self-confidence. Field, 44, lives in New Albany, Indiana (near Louisville, Kentucky) and was diagnosed with HIV in 1996. Soon afterward, she enrolled in a belly dancing class to stay in shape and to cope with depression and the bodily changes lipodystrophy wrought. "Every time I looked in the mirror, I saw the illness," she says. "Belly dancing [embodied] everything I'd lost emotionally: self esteem and sensuousness."

Field has traveled across the country teaching at HIV retreats, colleges and high schools. Her classes encourage women to have fun and not to be self-conscious about wearing a hip scarf or baring their midriffs. "You can still tell I have lipo, but I don't care anymore," she says. "It's not about that. If you feel beautiful, you will look beautiful."

The energy in class is seductive, says Sonja Ortman, 38, who took her first class with Field last year. "There's a definite need for alternative therapies in an [empowering] environment like this," she says. "You can [really] feel women celebrating their sexuality through the dance." Roll with it, baby.

*Name has been changed.

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