

Home Fire Safety and Awareness for Belly Dancers

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DISCLAIMER: This advice is not official. I hope that my tips and advice will inspire you to connect with official sources such as your local fire department.

Introduction: I would like to share some fire safety tips with everyone given the recent tragedy that happened to an important member of our dance community. These tips are based on two years of training and experience as a firefighter in New York State and my own personal research on the subject. Feel free to e-mail me with any questions if you would like an electronic copy of this document to keep for yourself or to share with others.

The ultimate resource is your local fire department. If you have questions, they are great people to ask. If you are shy about calling or stopping by, most fire departments have e-mail addresses that you can find through google.

Part I. House Fire Prevention and Awareness: Before the Fire

A. Safety Devices for your Home

1. Smoke Detectors/Alarms

a. These are your first line of defense against house fires. 66% of home fire deaths occurred in homes with no smoke alarm or without a working smoke alarm in 2009! Smoke detectors should be inspected monthly, whether they are 100% battery powered or wired into your home with a backup battery. To help remember to check them, write it in your calendar or always do it after something else you do monthly. To inspect your smoke detector, push the "test" button and make sure it beeps. Most smoke detectors will chirp (beep once every 20 seconds-5 minutes) when the battery is low but it's always best to be proactive and check. The battery should be replaced twice per year. I recommend replacing the battery whenever you adjust your clocks for daylight savings to help you remember.

b. Smoke detectors should be replaced every 10 years at least. If you're not sure how old your detectors are, just replace them. When you replace your detector, I recommend getting one that is both "ionization" and "photoelectric" as these use two different techniques to detect fires. I also recommend the combined smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, which are convenient. As a minimum you should have one smoke detector on every floor of your home. Good locations are outside of bedrooms and near the kitchen. The smoke detector should go on the ceiling or 4 to 12 inches from the ceiling on the wall.

2. Fire Extinguishers

a. These are your second line of defense against house fires, and make thoughtful housewarming gifts. If you don't have a fire extinguisher, go out and get one, they are available at many hardware stores as well as amazon.com and many other web sites. They aren't an expensive investment at only \$20-\$30 for a small model. Make sure your extinguisher is "tri-class", "multipurpose" or "ABC." Depending on the size and layout of your home, you may want multiple extinguishers. If you haven't done so already, read and memorize the instructions for how to use your exact fire extinguisher. Make sure that you can visualize in your head how to

follow the operation instructions. Most people don't think clearly in emergency situations, you don't want to be fumbling with figuring out how to use the extinguisher. *Seconds matter.*

b. The best location for a fire extinguisher is mounted to your wall in a central accessible location. While it is an eyesore, keeping an extinguisher on the floor or in a closet or cabinet leaves the opportunity for the extinguisher to be buried under your other belongings. Again, seconds matter and you don't want to have to dig or move anything to get to your extinguisher. Plus maybe a guest will see your prominently displayed extinguisher and be inspired to go out and get one. If you really don't like the look, some companies make fire extinguishers in white instead of red, which will blend with your wall better. Another good location for an extinguisher is right next to your bed so when the detector goes off in the middle of the night you can just grab it right when you get up.

c. You should inspect your extinguisher monthly when you inspect your smoke detectors. First, remove the extinguisher from the mount to make sure it comes out easily. Next, give the extinguisher a gentle shake to help prevent the powder from caking in the bottom. Then, make sure that the little gauge at the top is pointed in the safe zone and that the hose or nozzle is not cracked. Remove any dust from the extinguisher, and inspect it for leaks, cracks, dents, or corrosion while you dust. Most extinguishers have the year of manufacture printed on the bottom or side label, check to make sure that it is not more than 10 years old. If your fire extinguisher fails any point of this inspection, I recommend getting rid of it and getting a new one. If your fire extinguisher doesn't have a gauge, it is probably an old extinguisher, so get rid of it. If you ever use your fire extinguisher, it is done and should be replaced. If you are going through your monthly inspection and are uncertain about one of the points in the inspection (for example, you aren't sure if there is just a dirty spot or corrosion) you can take it to your fire department and ask them to quickly look at it or call the manufacturer and ask. Also call the manufacturer if you can't tell how old the extinguisher is.

d. Check with your local fire department to see if they or any neighboring fire departments offer community fire extinguisher courses.

3. Escape ladders. If you live in a multistory home or your apartment is on the second or third floor, consider getting an escape ladder. In case you cannot exit via the stairs, you can hang the ladder from your window and climb down to safety. The best place to keep one of these is near an escape window. If you do live in an apartment with a fire escape, make sure you are 100% clear on which windows lead to the fire escape and which don't.

4. Fire Blankets. These are great for putting out small fires (think like a cloth napkin on fire, not your recycle bin on fire) when you don't want to pull out the extinguisher. Fire blankets are also good in case you or any other person catches fire as you can wrap the blanket around them to extinguish the fire. You can get a fire blankets from many web sites such as amazon.com or firesafetysource.com. Duvetyn/Duvetyne cloth (also known as "commando cloth" or "duvy") is a very inexpensive version of a fire blanket. You can purchase this from www.firemecca.com, or filmtools.com

5. Automatic systems. If you are building a new home, consider getting sprinklers put in. If you already own a home, some houses can be retrofitted to have sprinklers. Also consider investing in an automatic range-top fire suppression system. These can cost upwards of \$100, but are worth saving up for. Most house fires occur in the kitchen, and most kitchen fires start at the rangetop. These are devices that sit above your stove and shoot out a fire extinguishing

agent if there is ever a fire on your stove. I like StoveTop FireStop best because it's very easy to install (it's magnetic, so installation takes no time at all) and it's a nice simple system. These systems are designed to sit right above your cooking area so you don't have to worry about them going off and making a mess when you are just making smoke from frying something. Consult the manufacturer about what "checks" you should do if you invest in one of these systems.

B. Preventing fires before they start and pre-fire damage control

1. Smoking. If you are a smoker and you smoke in your home, do not smoke in bed or if you are very sleepy. Make sure that you have a deep ashtray and that the ashes and butts are cool before you dispose of them. If you use matches to light, either run the match under water or let it cool before throwing it out.

2. Clutter. Clear your house of clutter. I know this can be hard, many of us are balancing multiple jobs, school, dance career, and/or family. However keeping clutter free is important for two reasons. Firstly, you want to be able to move about your home in case of emergencies. Secondly, clutter is excellent fuel for a potential fire. Unless you are a magazine or newspaper collector, get rid of magazines, catalogs, and newspapers as soon as you are done with them. Keep your books neatly stacked in a bookshelf, or ideally in a cabinet with a door that shuts. Don't keep trash, recycle, or junk mail sitting around, take it out. Keep clothing or other fabric in folded in drawers or in closets. Keep all of your belongings stowed away in bins, drawers, cabinets, or closets. No matter how busy you get, keep clutter away from your oventop, toaster, and adjacent kitchen counter! Dead plants count as clutter, because they are an excellent fuel for a fire. Keep your plants watered or throw them out, *especially Christmas trees!*

3. Lint. Empty your lint trap every time you use the dryer, and throw out the lint right away. Get in the habit of checking and emptying the lint trap before and after you run your dryer just to be double certain. Lint is very flammable, don't keep a "lint bucket" just get rid of it.

4. Electronics. Inspect the cords to the electronic devices in your home. This means lamps, power strips, computers, microwaves, hair dryers, anything you plug into an outlet. They are making things cheaper and cheaper every year, so inspect the cords even to new items. Look for any signs of fraying or exposed wires, especially near the plug and near where the cord connects to the electronic device. If you see any frayed wire, get rid of the item immediately and cut the cord so no one tries to salvage it from your trash and use it. You can help prevent wires from fraying by always plugging and unplugging them by the plug, not pulling on the wire. Also do not run wires under carpets or under high traffic areas. Checking every wire in your home is very time consuming so once a month pick a room and check all the wires in that room. High load electronics such as your microwave or refrigerator should be plugged directly into a wall. Anything that has a "power brick" such as a laptop needs extra attention, as the power brick can get hot. Make sure that the power brick is out in the open, and not wedged between furniture. Also avoid "daisy chaining" (plugging extension cords into extension cords).

5. Heat. If you are cooking using heat, always keep your sleeves rolled up and secure your long beautiful belly dancer hair as either can come in contact with heat and catch fire when you are cooking. When you are cooking, stay around the kitchen or make sure someone else is. If you must leave the kitchen (bathroom break, kids are crying, cell phone ringing...) just quickly flip off the heat to your oven, stove, or griddle. Is it really so bad to let your dinner coast for a

minute while you step out of the kitchen? The first big fire I was firefighting at was started by a little pot of oatmeal! This advice is extra important on days like Thanksgiving when you may be extra distracted. Also be sure to keep on top of keeping your oven clean. The same advice goes for a space heater. Don't use the space heater if you are asleep or not in the room. If you're going to get up for a minute, just shut off the space heater and turn it on when you get back. Make sure your "space" heater has enough "space" by keeping the surrounding area clutter free and in a position where it will not fall. Heating blankets and heating pads are much safer than space heaters, so use these instead where possible.

6. Hot Grease. Be extra cautious when cooking with hot oil, grease, animal fat, or vegetable fat. Grease fires are extra dangerous because they tend to suddenly burst into ignition rather than slowly building up. If you need to cook something that involves heating up grease or oil to a high temperature, keep a big metal lid and baking soda handy. The instructions for how to use these are outlined in the kitchen fire section later in the document.

7. Use the correct watt light bulb. Most light fixtures have a wattage listed on them, this is the maximum. For example, if your light fixture says "75 watt" do not put a 100 watt bulb in but 75 watt, 50 watt, and 25 watt are okay. Also make sure that you are aware of which light fixtures get hot and ensure that they are not near anything flammable.

8. Candles are beautiful, but pose a fire danger.

a. If you like using candles for ambiance, there are actually lots of nice inexpensive flameless electronic candles available. If you can't part with the real thing, consider the candle itself, the candle holder, where you put the candle, and whether the candle will be supervised. In terms of real candles, the short fat candles are safer than the tall skinny candles. Make sure that your candles are away from any sort of draft, such as an open window or a blowing A/C or heater. Make sure you are using a big wide sturdy candle holder or that your candle is in a tray which is wide enough to catch dripping wax. Shorter wide candle holders or candle plates/trays are better. Also make sure that there is nothing flammable above or below the candle, such as curtains, drapes, paintings, posters, or tablecloths. Usually the best place for a lit candle is in the middle of your room. Don't leave a lit candle unsupervised. If you need to leave the room for any reason, just blow out the candle and light it again when you get back or just carry it with you. Don't light a candle if you are feeling sleepy, and make sure candles are out before you go to bed. Use potpourri or air freshener spray in your bathroom instead of lighting a candle. Keep a flashlight around for when the power goes out that way you don't have to light candles.

b. Incense is less dangerous than candles but is still a fire hazard. Make sure you have a good holder for your incense. This means that the incense should not be able to fall and roll anywhere, and that 100% of the ashes that fall will be caught. I like the incense holders that have a lid that shuts as the incense and ashes can not escape.

c. If you belly dance with candles and want to use the real thing for your shows, make sure that your venue has a fire extinguisher and that you and the staff are familiar with its location and how to operate it. If the venue does not have an extinguisher, bring one with you and keep it near your performance area.

9. Windows. Make sure that none of your windows are painted or nailed shut. Make sure that they open easily from the top or bottom. Make sure that you can remove the screen to any window in your home. Also if possible make sure that all exterior doors to your home can be unlocked without a key.

10. If you have a chimney, get it cleaned regularly and trim away any tree branches near it.

11. Scan any important documents and e-mail them to yourself. If you are worried about someone hacking into your e-mail and stealing your scanned information, there is a free program called Axecrypt that will allow you to password encrypt any electronic document. Making copies of photos, music, and videos is getting cheaper and cheaper in this digital age. If you have things that you don't want to part with, get an external hard drive, make a copy of everything important, and keep it in a safety deposit box or with a trusted friend (who does not live with you).

12. If you have children or young adults, try to involve them in fire safety where possible. People mature and develop at different ages, so you should tailor the general advice in this section to your child or young adult.

a. For very young children, teach them not to be afraid of firefighters. A firefighter wearing full gear and breathing bottled air in a smoky environment while searching for a child can look very scary and sound "like a monster". Your child may not understand that underneath the bright flashlight, gear, and scary sounds is a person trying to help them. It's important that your child develops a positive association with firefighters. There are some nice bedtime children's books about firefighters where they can see pictures of firefighters and learn not to hide from them.

b. For young children, you also want to make sure that they know that firefighters are friends and not scary. Show your child videos of firefighters on the internet, or even take your child to a parade or community day where the fire department will be around. You can also start teaching them to crawl if there is smoke, and how to evacuate to your family meeting place outside your home. This is also an important age to teach them that fire is a dangerous tool and not a toy. Explain that matches and lighters are dangerous, and that if they find either they should bring it to an adult. Also be sure to teach your child to immediately find an adult if there ever is a fire. Make sure your child understands not to "hide" the fire from adults. I once was at a house fire that was caused by a child that accidentally lit a paper on fire. The child was scared of getting in trouble so instead of getting the attention of a parent, the child threw the paper in the paper recycle bin.

c. For children, you can start to involve them in fire prevention and preparedness and teach them how to call 911. For example, when you are out running errands with them, you can make a game out of spotting fire extinguishers, emergency pull boxes, and emergency exit signs. You can also teach them what to do when the smoke detector is going off (make sure they know what the smoke detector sounds like) and quiz them on how to evacuate various rooms in case of a fire.

d. For older children and young adults, you can involve them in your monthly extinguisher and smoke detector checks, and maybe even teach them when and how to use an extinguisher. Also, fire safety makes a cool science fair topic for this age.

13. Shut every door in your home when you're asleep or away, unless you have pets that need to get around. Shut doors are great at slowing the spread of fire and at preventing fires from getting more air.

C. Mental Preparation

1. Memorize which windows have fire escapes, where your extinguisher(s) is, and ideally

two ways to escape from each room of your house. If you live or work in a high-rise building, be familiar with the building evacuation plan and *know where every staircase is since you do not take the elevator in case of fires*. Off the top of your head, do you know which way each door in your home opens? (Sometimes when people panic they will push or pull a door the wrong way, which slows escape time) These may seem like silly and trivial exercises, but the toxic fumes and gasses found in housefire smoke can make you dizzy, disoriented, and lethargic. The more you've thought about it in advance, the better.

2. Every once in a while, do some trial fire scenarios in your head. Thinking through scenarios will help you develop "brain muscle memory" so if an emergency arises you will have already thought about what to do previously.

Part II. During and After the Fire

A. General Advice

***** In the case of a fire, your absolute #1 priority is to get out safely. #2 is calling 911. Everything else is less important*****

B. What to do when your smoke detector is going off

1. Take a deep breath through your nose, and use your senses. Do you hear your roommate or spouse cooking? Is your home empty? Do you smell smoke? Even if you think you know what is setting off the detector, proceed with caution and use common sense. For example, if you are cooking and you are making a lot of smoke and your detector goes off, how do you know whether it is your cooking smoke or smoke from elsewhere in your home setting off the detector?

2. Approach the detector with caution to determine the cause of the alarm. If there is a shut door between you and the fire alarm, don't just go blustering through it, even if you think you know why the detector is going off. Always test the middle of the door, then doorjam, then the door handle with the back of your hand. Do not use the front of your hand, if you burn it you will make it more difficult for yourself to escape. If you feel heat do not open the door, find another way out and call 911. If you have time and there is a piece of fabric readily accessible, throw it under your door.

3. If you don't feel any heat, cautiously open the door and again use your senses. If you don't have to open any doors to determine the cause of the alarm, proceed cautiously and use your senses. If you happen to pass by your fire extinguisher, grab it. Shut any doors behind you and turn off lights as you walk. Sure, sometimes the smoke alarm goes off for a non-emergency reason. It's better to follow all the safety precautions and feel silly when it's not a big deal. Plus if it turns out that it's nothing, you got to practice checking your door for heat and you can do your monthly extinguisher check while it's in your hand.

C. Fire in your home

1. Putting out the fire.

a. if you determine the cause of the smoke alarm and it is a fire, asses the situation. Again, your number one priority is to get out safely and call 911. *Physical belongings, dwellings, pets can be replaced. People can't.* If the fire is small (small means recycle bin or

curtains on fire for example), is not producing large amount of smoke or black smoke, you have a means of escape, and you feel confident that you can put it out, use your extinguisher as directed on the instructions after calling 911. Calling 911 **first** is important because it takes time for your 911 center to process the call and for your fire department to respond. In case you are not successful with the extinguisher, your fire department will already be on their way. You can also try to use your extinguisher if the fire is blocking your only means of escape. Again, you should only use your extinguisher if you are confident that you can control the fire or if the fire is blocking your only way out.

b. If you are going to use the extinguisher, aim at the bottom of the flames sweeping from side to side, not the top. By aiming at the bottom you are spraying the source of the fire, not the hot gasses (flames) that are coming up. Also by spraying up instead of down you can cause a thermal inversion, pushing the hot gasses and smoke down from the top of the room onto you. Also consider the angle at which you are using the extinguisher and be sure not to push the fire into your escape route. Be aware that what comes out of your extinguisher is a powder and that the extinguisher may keep spraying even once you stop squeezing the handle or pushing the button. The dust from an extinguisher isn't great for you to breathe, so once you are done, get out.

c. Don't try to pat out a fire with your fire blanket unless the fire is very small and controllable, and you feel confident that you can put it out that way. If the fire is too big already you are just giving it more material to burn by trying to pat it out. If the fire set off your smoke detector it is probably already too big to pat out. However if it is still very small you can try to pat it out with a readily accessible natural fiber fabric (like a towel, wool blanket, duvex, or ideally a fire blanket). Do not use a synthetic fabric to try to put out a fire because while a natural fiber can burn, a synthetic fabric can melt into your skin. If you are trying to put out a fire this way the best and safest technique is to lay the fabric flat over the fire and then just leave it.

2. If you have determined that there is a fire in your home and you are exiting, shut doors, turn off lights and other electronics, shut windows, and turn off the A/C or heat on your way out. Only do these things if you think you have time.

At this point if you haven't already, call 911. Also alert your neighbors. Even if you live in a house with a lawn, alert your neighbors as fires can spread from house to house especially during a summer drought. Stand a safe distance away from your home. A safe distance in most states is defined as 1.5 (one and a half) times the building height. So for example if your apartment building is 30 feet tall, you should stand 45 feet away. Fire can cause a house or building to collapse, by keeping this distance you will be out of the collapse zone.

3. If you must pass through smoke to exit, crawl as low as you can. The smoke produced from a housefire is very different from fireplace or campfire smoke. Again, there are many nasty toxins, gasses, and other particles released that can make you disoriented, dizzy, and lethargic. The toxins, gasses, and particles that you don't want to breathe are all hot and will rise. It might not look so bad and you may think you can walk through it, but the air temperature and smoke concentration can change quickly and you may already be disoriented from breathing a little bit of smoke when you find yourself thinking this.

4. If you are trapped in a room with a window that is too high from the ground to escape from, ensure that the door is shut and block the seams of the door as best as possible with cloth or tape. Open the window and hang something out (ideally something white) so the fire

department can tell that someone is in there. Open the top and the bottom of the window equally but do not break the glass. Usually the smoke will go out the top and the outside air will come in the bottom. If smoke starts to come in the window from an adjacent window, shut the window.

5. I know we've all heard this over and over, but if any of your clothing is on fire: "Stop, drop and roll." In other words, lay down and roll around on the ground to try to put out the fire. If you have a fire blanket handy, wrap it around yourself as this will also extinguish the fire. You wouldn't believe how many people run around when they are on fire, which just brings air to the fire faster. Once the fire is out call 911 and do not attempt to remove the clothing as this can cause more damage to your skin, *especially* if the fabric is synthetic. You can remove any jewelry that is not immediately at the burn site as burns can cause swelling shortly after the burn.

There is an unfortunate amount of folklore out there about what to do to treat a burn. Do not use ice, butter, essential oils, lotions, or honey on the burn as this can make it worse via further damage or encouraging infection. Vinegar is controversial. For a first degree burn (looks like a sunburn) you can apply cool water right away to prevent further damage and stop the burning process. Pure Aloe Vera (straight from the plant) is okay too. A second degree burn is more painful and will involve red skin with blisters or red skin that may be slightly peeling off and the skin will be moist. Again you can apply cool water right away to stop further burning. If the burn is smaller than the palm of your hand, you can treat it at home by treating it like a deep scrape or cut - cover the burn in a sterile breathable gauze bandage, and look out for infection. If the burn is any bigger than this, seek medical attention. A third degree burn is the most dangerous, and may not even hurt right away if the nerves under the skin have been burned. A third degree burn will be either black or ashy and very dry. The skin has been completely burned and immediate medical attention is essential. For a third degree burn or large second degree, try to keep the burned area elevated above the heart as this will help to prevent shock.

D. Kitchen Fires

1. Yes, kitchen fires get their own section because kitchen fires are very common. If you have a kitchen fire, try to shut off the heat to your stove or oven if it is on or unplug the appliance if you can do so safely. In the case of a grease or oil fire, do not pick up the pan and dump it in the sink or try to throw it out the window. You are bringing more air to the fire by doing this and run the risk of spreading the fire or burning yourself by splashing the burning grease. Also do not dump water on a grease fire as grease floats on water and you will just splash grease around your kitchen. Do not dump flour or sugar on a grease fire, this is a dangerous urban legend as sugar and flour can burn. The best way to put out a grease fire is to dump baking soda on it and then put the lid on. Salt can also work, but it is not as effective as baking soda as salt adsorbs the grease and baking soda actually produces carbon dioxide to smother the fire. Once you put the lid on, don't take the lid off until the pan is cool. Your ABC fire extinguisher will work too, just make sure that you stand back far enough or else you can splash the grease around your kitchen and spread the fire.

2. If you have a microwave or oven fire, do not open the door, this will immediately make it worse. If it is the microwave, turn it off and unplug it. Microwaves and ovens are built to withstand heat, most of these fires will go out on their own if you leave the door shut.

E. Fire safety in the workplace or other locations

1. Be aware of your surroundings. In your workplace, make sure you are familiar with the location of any fire extinguishers, emergency pull boxes, and emergency exits. If your workplace does not have fire extinguishers for some reason, bring this up with your employer. Also do not ever use those fire hoses stored in the wall. Most buildings have these for insurance reasons only. They are usually not properly tested and may not even work.

2. Whenever you go someplace new, get in the habit of looking around for fire extinguishers, emergency pull boxes, and emergency exits.

In conclusion:

I don't mean for this advice to scare you, there is no sense in living in constant fear of fire. While most house fires start in the kitchen, this doesn't mean that you should always order out food to avoid the risk. If anything I hope that this document should help you feel less afraid of fires as you and your home are prepared.

Part III. References and Resources

A. Resources - These are places you can go to find out more

- Great simple info about all things fire extinguisher: www.fireextinguisher.com
- Official FEMA website with lots of well written and nicely organized information: http://www.usfa.dhs.gov/citizens/home_fire_prev/
- Home fire safety checklist (made for kids, but good for adults too): <http://www.sparky.org/PDF/SparkyChecklist.pdf>
- <http://www.firesafety.gov/>

B. References - This is where some of my research information comes from:

- Hall, John R. Jr. "Home cooking fire patterns and trends." July 2006. *NFPA Online*. 20 Nov 2006
- New York State Firefighter I Textbook and course
- <http://www.fire.nist.gov/bfrlpubs/fire07/PDF/f07079.pdf>
- <http://www.nfpa.org/newsReleaseDetails.asp?categoryid=488&itemid=50509>
- NFPA's "[Home Candle Fires](#)" report by Marty Ahrens, June 2010.
- <http://www.nfpa.org/assets/files/PDF/Cookingfactsheet.pdf>
- NFPA's "[Children Playing with Fire](#)" report by John R. Hall, Jr., November 2010.