

How Do Pilates Exercises Work?

By Miriam Richter

Last month I wrote about the dangers of working with Pilates instructors who are under-trained and over lauded. This month I would like to focus on some of the Pilates Principles that make this form of exercise so powerful and positive.

THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION:

This concept has been around for centuries and inspired by different cultures and philosophies as well as contemporary advancements in biomechanical understanding. The idea is to engage the mind and the body to create new muscle patterns (movement). This requires concentration and focus. Movement patterns are strengthened when each exercise is performed with focused control; this is called muscle memory. By teaching proper movement patterns, we can help people to correct problems with walking or with posture. Imagery is a powerful tool to help this process and instructors use verbal or tactile cueing to strengthen this mind-body connection. Another wonderful benefit of the mind-body connection is increased body awareness.

CONTROL THE IDEA of muscle control is a key concept of Pilates. This means no sloppy, slapdash movements. Each repetition is performed with careful control to avoid injury and to produce effective results. Consequently, you do not need high intensity or multiple repetitions to effect change.

CENTERING: If you think about it, the muscle groups used most during the day are arms and legs. Pilates felt that the middle or center of the body, abdominals, lower back, pelvis, hips and buttocks were neglected. Pilates called this area the Powerhouse. Each movement is initiated from the “center or core” and flows outward to the extremities. All of our muscles are connected directly or indirectly to our center. As the core becomes stronger, the rest of the body works more efficiently. Centering also implies a physical focus that can produce a spiritual calmness.

STABILIZING: It is important that the core or center be quiet and stable before movement occurs. The original Method taught that the lower back should be kept flat during all of the exercises. We now know that “neutral spine” or the natural lordotic curve of the lower spine is the most stable position and



affords the most shock absorption for the back. Neutral spine is in place when the pubic bone and the hipbones are in a straight line. You can find this for yourself by lying flat, placing your palms on your hipbones and connecting your fingers. Palms and fingers should be in a straight line and parallel to the floor. Stabilization is accomplished using the breath.

BREATHING: Pilates taught “to breathe correctly you must completely exhale and inhale”. This sounds like a simple statement but I have been amazed over the years at the number of people who do not know how to breathe. Try this: stand in front of a mirror, take a deep breath filling your lungs from the bottom to the top. Your shoulders should rise slightly as you inhale. Imagine your ribs separating going east and west. As you exhale, blow all of the air out of your lungs, sort of like a bellows collapsing completely. Feel the muscles of the trunk tighten, draw your bellybutton toward your spine as if you are zipping pants that are a bit too tight. This is core engagement and is performed with each complete exhalation.

ALIGNMENT: Correct posture and joint alignment are important for proper muscular balance. Alignment must be dynamic, when the body is in motion as well as when it is motionless. Clients who are relatively new to Pilates tell me that one of the first benefits is an awareness of posture. During each Pilates session, clients are taught to be aware of position of every body part that translates to improved posture.

FLUIDITY: Each Pilates movement is performed with grace and fluidity. There are no isolated, jarring movements because our bodies do not move that way. Pilates sessions are put together so that one exercise flows into the next.

All Pilates principles are integrated; no one stands alone and That is what makes this form of exercise so powerful. Together they make a wonderfully holistic mind-body workout. See you next month.

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