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Articles

Pilates for Bodyworkers

Working Core to Core

By Cathy Ulrich

Originally published in *Massage & Bodywork* magazine, June/July 2005.
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Above are the words of Gary Calderone, Pilates instructor and national speaker, who has just begun teaching massage therapists how to find their own self-knowledge through movement awareness.

"We've found over the years that most people don't have movement awareness integrated into their bodies," says Gary Salinger, director of the Healing Arts Institute in Fort Collins, Colo., which is partnering with Calderone to present the new Pilates course. "This is a huge detriment to the massage therapist, because if you're out there working on five people a day and your body starts falling apart, you're in real trouble. It's important people discover where their movement imbalances are and find ways of correcting them. The sooner they do it in the program, the easier it is for them to not only be successful in the program but also for the duration of their career."

The 15-hour Pilates for Massage Therapists course covers Pilates theories and concepts, as well as experiential activities. Students will learn to identify boney landmarks on each other, sense their own core, and learn the classical Pilates breath and its function. They'll work with structural lines through the body and learn the ergonomics of correct stretching, as well as the basic Pilates mat exercises and their modifications. They'll "gain valuable insight into developing and maintaining strength and flexibility for themselves and future clients."¹

In a presentation delivered to the Polestar Pilates International Conference in 2004, Calderone challenged Pilates instructors to examine the original teachings of Pilates method founder Joseph H. Pilates and in so doing, incorporate body, mind, and spirit into their work. Originally labeled "Contrology," Pilates described his work as "gaining the mastery of your mind over the complete control of your body."²

Calderone brings these teaching's into the 21st century: "Contrology is self-knowledge and is more than controlling the body with the mind, it's integrating body, mind, and spirit to help clients reach their full potential."

Pilates Roots

Joseph H. Pilates was an athlete, self-taught exercise physiologist, and visionary. Born in Germany in 1880, he suffered from rickets, asthma, and rheumatic fever as a young child -- conditions that prompted him to develop his own fitness program. He became so fit he served as a model for a series of anatomical charts at age 14 and excelled at many sports including gymnastics and boxing. He happened to be in England when World War I broke out and because of his German citizenship, was



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sent to an internment camp where he resided for the duration of the war. His interest in fitness training led him to assist the bedridden patients in the camp's hospital where he rigged springs and pulleys on the hospital beds to create variable resistance.

He returned to Germany after the war, continued to develop his movement program, and at one point worked with Rudolf von Laban, the creator of Laban Movement Analysis. After declining the German government's offer to train the New German Army, Pilates moved to New York City and taught his fitness program there. On the transatlantic voyage, he met his wife, Clara Zeuner, and together they opened their studio in 1926.

The couple gained fame working with dancers and performers in New York, but they also worked with people outside the performing arts. They spent the next 40 years teaching, working with clients and developing their program. Pilates died in 1967 at the age of 87 -- possibly from complications due to smoke inhalation from a fire the previous year. He taught and enjoyed vigorous health until shortly before his death. His wife continued to teach until her retirement in 1971.³

"It was really his ambition to help people realize that his exercises were to condition the full body," says Irene Zelonka, Clara Pilates' niece. "[Joseph's system] wasn't designed to lose weight or change appearance, it was to use all parts of the body so you wouldn't get overly muscled. He taught proper breathing and blood circulation, as he said, 'to clean out your system.' Muscle-building wasn't the purpose. He didn't believe weight lifting was beneficial for conditioning the body."

In a recent interview, Zelonka described the impact her aunt and uncle had on her life and talked about how Joseph Pilates frequently used massage in his practice. "I was in his studio one time and a mother brought in her young son who was in a wheelchair and could not move his legs. He was suffering from infantile paralysis or polio. I watched my uncle work with this child for an hour, massaging his legs. He used camphor oil to warm the tissues, and he brought out an [exercise] apparatus. After he worked with this boy, he was able to move his toes for the first time."

Now 76, Zelonka continues to lead an active life. She plays tennis regularly and says she still does her Pilates exercises. "Up to this day, when I catch myself in poor posture, I correct it. I'm very aware of how I stand and how I walk."

Zelonka's daughter, Nancy, who practices as a massage therapist in Southern California, says of her years growing up with her mother, "I was always aware of my posture and how I used my body." She feels her family history has helped in her massage practice. "I'm very conscious of how people get off the table. My mom always said to get up like a cat. After a massage, people just sit up. I like to help them up, and I tell them to get up slowly and stretch."

The Pilates Method

Joseph Pilates believed "that only through the attainment of perfect balance of mind and body can one appreciate what really constitutes normal health."⁴ This was the basic principle upon which he created his system. To accomplish this goal, the following fundamentals are observed:

Concentration and Awareness: Pilates felt that every movement, every feeling within the body, counted. In order to do any of the movements correctly, acute awareness of the body's sensations is essential. With awareness comes presence and a different relationship between the mind and body.⁵ Pilates instructors rely on visualization to enhance awareness. Calderone shares this example: When clients are asked to tilt the pelvis while supine, they're taught to visualize that the belly, from the costal arch to the pubic symphysis, is a bowl filled with water. The client is asked to tilt the bowl without spilling the water.

Using Your Powerhouse: In the Pilates culture, the area of the torso between the lower ribs and the hips is considered the power center of the body. Pilates felt that strengthening this area was crucial for supporting the spine, increasing efficiency, promoting improved posture, and creating proper breathing.⁶

Precise Control: True to his "Contrology" label, Joseph Pilates wanted his students to develop a strong mind controlling the body's movements. Rather than beating the body into submission however, Pilates felt each movement offered the designed benefit only if done correctly.⁷ He designed equipment to allow for individual strengths and weaknesses so that students could accomplish the movements with precise control. The springs and pulleys he attached to the hospital beds in the internment camp in England were the precursors to modern-day Pilates equipment.⁸

Flowing Natural Movement: A Pilates workout consists of a series of movements. Each movement is done at a controlled fluid pace, and transitions between movements are performed with grace and a sense of continuity. By introducing a conscious transition between movements, students can carry this sense of flow into the transitions in their daily lives.⁹

Oppositional Energy: Pilates instructors frequently teach students to visualize two points in the body stretching apart as movement is initiated. This creates an energetic response that allows muscle groups to work in harmony and elicits lengthening and alignment.¹⁰ For example, when standing, imagine your feet gently pressing into the ground as you lift from the crown of your head. What do you notice in your body?

Pilates Breathing: "Breathing is the first act of life, and the last. Our very life depends on it,"¹¹ Pilates said. He created a specific way of breathing that emphasized the exhale. The breath is the first thing students learn, and it's incorporated into every movement. It is the key to the Pilates sense of core (see more about breath in the sidebar).

As for training, it can take many forms and frequently depends on the setting in which the Pilates method is offered. Health clubs frequently offer mat classes, but won't have training equipment. Medical offices and chiropractic offices offer specialized care, but are focused on rehabilitation.

Most Pilates-certified instructors recommend clients start with private sessions, usually a combination of mat exercises and equipment work, prior to starting mat classes. This way, the client has a chance to learn the program in a one-on-one setting. While mat classes can be economical, students may omit key aspects of the movements simply because the instructor cannot give individualized attention to a class of 20. The instructor serves an important role in both teaching and spotting the student so that movements are done correctly.

Pilates for Bodyworkers

The Healing Arts Institute offers Pilates for Massage Therapists as an elective to its advanced students, but Salinger says, "As we observe the results and successes, there's a good chance we'll integrate it into our [basic] program. Movement awareness is already in our program. Our students understand where their hips are, they learn to use their weight to their advantage, but Pilates is an additional value for people because it integrates a deeper level of awareness. It also gives them an opportunity to work one-on-one with another person. They receive the work so they feel it within themselves. They learn about those movement restrictions they may not be aware of, and they're seeing what's going on in other people as well.

"For a therapist looking at a massage career, it's important for them to develop a competitive advantage. If they're drawn to corrective therapies, they need to figure a way to embody the healing within their own system. When a therapist develops an internal recognition and an internal understanding, they know pain on a physical and emotional level. Those people that have the ability to develop empathy become very successful therapists."

Pilates as a movement education system may be that advantage. When massage therapists can integrate internal awareness, strong, flexible bodies, and a deeper understanding of movement, posture, and structural alignment, they have the opportunity to bring special skills and understanding to the table. They communicate with their clients in a kinesthetic language that transcends the verbal, a language of one body speaking to another from a place of health,

strength, and empathy.

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More than Exercise

Pilates has become a household word in the United States. It's now offered in spas, medical clinics, rehabilitation facilities, chiropractic clinics, and most health clubs. Training for instructors ranges from a weekend course to years of study, apprenticeship, and certification. Videotapes and books abound on the subject, but with this popularity comes many opportunities for dilution of the essence of the work. It is important to remember that Pilates is much more than exercise -- it's a movement education program designed to condition the whole body and increase inner awareness.

The Pilates Breath in Constructive Rest

This exercise is designed to help you get a sense of the Pilates core. Practice this process, preferably prior to your first client of the day, and notice what happens to your awareness and touch.

First, assume the position of Constructive Rest:

1. Start with two bolsters or pillows and a mat. Lying supine, place one bolster under your head and neck area. The neck bolster is smaller to support the curvature of the cervical spine and to bring the head forward, allowing it to be fully supported. You want to avoid extension at the neck, and you're looking for slight flexion at the occipital-axis joint.
2. Place a larger bolster under your knees to allow the weight of the hips to come down. This helps eliminate the sense of a swayback and prevents extension in the ribs. The spinal curves relax so the ribs can move against the spine, and the spine is allowed to contact the mat. Feel your center of gravity connecting toward the mat. In this position, the outside of the legs can rest. As your body relaxes, become aware of your center line, and notice how your spinal column lengthens.

Now, it's time for the Pilates Breath:

1. In the Constructive Rest position, inhale through your nose like you're smelling roses with an intention of depth. Feel your chest fill with air.

2. Hot air exhale -- Exhale out of your mouth. With one hand held a few inches in front of your mouth, feel the heat of your breath. Place your other hand on your stomach and exhale completely and fully. Feel with your hand as your belly flattens, deepens, and widens the lower abdominal compartment. In the Constructive Rest position, the exhale allows you to drop down in your spine.

3. Second exhale -- Inhale again, and on the second exhale, move your hands to the lower ribs. Feel your ribs deflate as oblique and transverse abdominals fire. Notice how your bones anchor into the mat and how your spinal column drops into it. The tension in your shoulders recedes and the mid-back lengthens. Let the spinal curves lengthen and notice a sense of emptiness.

4. Now, with the next breath inhaled through your nose, move your hands to your lateral ribs. Allow the breath to come into your sides. Feel how this allows the spine to relax, the breath to fill the lower lungs. Sense the physiological alignment at the ribs, hips, and shoulders and how they relate to each other.

5. Allow yourself to experience the breath for as long as you like, focusing on the full expression of the exhale and filling of the lower lungs on the inhale.

6. Prepare to move into gravity. Anchor this experience by gently increasing the tone in your pelvic floor. Pretend that you're cutting off your urine flow -- not a full Kegel -- but a gentle squeezing of the pelvic floor so that it's toned and engaged as you transition from supine to sidelying to sitting to standing. Notice how your body feels now.

7. Anchor the experience in gravity. In standing, send your leg bones down into your feet and feel the sense of line through the pelvic floor to your crown.

8. Check in frequently with your breath as you go through your work day.

-- Courtesy of Gary Calderone



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