

# Applying the Healing Powers of Pilates



**A**s people's days become more complex and hurried, their health and general wellness often suffer. Pilates can open the door to the world of wellness and bridge the gap between rehabilitating the physical body and healing the whole body, mind and spirit.

When practicing Pilates, consider the following principles:

**Mindfulness and presence.** At the beginning of each session, clear your mind and start focusing on the present moment.

Close your eyes and visualize your body. Where you are holding tension? Notice areas that you may feel discomfort or pain. Are you taking shallow, quick breaths? Are your thoughts wandering? Are you engaging in negative self-talk?

The goal is to be aware of what is going on in your body and mind.

Next, make adjustments or modifications as needed. Tuck the chin to lengthen the back of the neck, relax the jaw, and allow the posterior part of your ribs to ease into the surface.

**Deep breathing.** For optimal health, every cell of the body needs to be fueled with oxygen. Learning to change your breathing style can positively impact your health, and Pilates can help you do this.

Deep-nostril posterior-lateral breathing provides the cells with optimal levels of oxygen,

relaxes the mind and body and increases the flexibility of the spine and thorax. The nasal breath spontaneously allows both the upper and lower parts of the chest cavity to expand. A slow nasal breath allows time for the diaphragm to engage in pulling air into the lower lobes of the lungs, where the majority of oxygen exchange occurs.

**Core principles.** Proper alignment, posture and movement from the core are vital to the Pilates technique. Through Pilates you can learn how to properly align the spine and every joint of the body.

Pilates machines, such as the Reformer, help users correctly perform therapeutic movements. By repeating these movements, you can train specific patterns of movement and improve joint flexibility, muscle length and muscle strength. Over time, muscles and joints will automatically perform movements properly during activities of daily living.

Think of the torso as a cylinder: the thoracic diaphragm is the top lid of the cylinder; the pelvic floor is the bottom lid of the cylinder; and the rib basket is the cylinder itself, with the transverse abdominis in the front and the multifidus in the back. For optimal function, the two diaphragms float directly above and below one another. This alignment will influence function, breathing performance, stability of the spine and freedom of movement.

Once you achieve proper alignment, you can engage the stabilizers of the spine and maintain their engagement during exercise, activities of daily living and recreational activities. Visualize an optimal pyramid. When the transverse abdominis and multifidus are properly supporting the top of the pelvis and lumbar spine, the posterior pelvic floor muscles can relax. This relaxation lets the ischial tuberosities decompress and provides a wide base of support. When the transverse abdominis and multifidus aren't working properly, the posterior pelvic floor muscles overwork and compress the base of the pyramid to create an inverted pyramid.

**Flow.** After you learn the basics of using each joint and muscle properly, the goal is to "flow" one movement into the next. You want to experience a flow of movement that allows the body to move naturally through its proper ranges of motion.

The ultimate goal is to transfer the flow of movement into a flow of life. When you are moving and living in flow, synchronicities begin to happen.

This type of advanced wellness takes time to develop, but it exemplifies the link between the principles of Pilates and the goals of achieving health and wellness. ■

This handout was compiled from the article "Pilates Principles" by Kelly Bradley, MSPT, CNC, CHHC, CPI, RYT, which appeared in *ADVANCE for Physical Therapists and PT Assistants*, vol. 19, no. 2, pg. 22.

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**STOTT Pilates**

2200 Yonge St., Ste. 500

Toronto, Ontario

Canada M4S 2C6

(416) 482-4050; (800) 910-0001

Fax: (416) 482-2742

E-mail: [info@stottpilates.com](mailto:info@stottpilates.com)

Web site: [www.stottpilates.com](http://www.stottpilates.com)