

PILATES FOR REHAB AND THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED

NOT EVERY METHOD OF EXERCISE CATERS TO SPECIAL POPULATIONS LIKE PILATES

By Lauren Dubeau

Think of exercise and you think of a muscled, firm body walking into the local fitness center and spending hours on a myriad of weight machines.

Think of Pilates, and you think of lean, lithe bodies stretching in a series of dance-like moves. Well, think again.

Many individuals who are severely de-conditioned, injured, physically disabled, aging or otherwise mobility challenged often do not feel capable of performing any type of exercise. Fortunately, Pilates is a perfect option for all fitness levels, ages, and stages. Often noted as a form of exercise for the highly skilled, rich or famous, Pilates is now being embraced more and more by the medical and rehab communities who are applauding the wide-reaching virtues of this highly targeted approach.

The idea of using Pilates for rehabilitation is definitely not new. As a matter of fact, the inventor of this exercise sensation, Joseph H. Pilates, began developing his method while working with incapacitated soldiers during WWI. An athlete himself, Joe used bedsprings and straps to provide resistance and help re-condition the injured. Once he relocated to New York City during the 1920s, he continued in this vein by working with injured dancers.

Today, Pilates continues to be used to create positive movement experiences for those with any type of movement dysfunction. Leading Pilates authorities are assisting this current by developing specialized programming for particular populations. Today there is a definite partnership between Pilates experts and rehabilitation



specialists and by working together, we can bridge the gap between rehab and fitness and be able to reach an immense number of individuals who otherwise would not realize their movement potential.

Mind-body alignment is the perfect starting point for any type of movement strategy. The concepts of breathing, pelvic and lumbar spine alignment, rib cage placement, shoulder mobility and stability, and head and neck alignment, can be applied to any movement for any diagnosis. Bringing awareness to posture may be the first step in improving fitness levels. Putting the body in a position where it moves and reacts more efficiently will take away much unwanted stress and strain. Developing proper movement patterns will also allow the body to heal in a way that reduces the likelihood of compensatory injuries.

Individuals who walk with assistance as well as those confined to wheelchairs can obtain dramatic benefits from a specialized exercise regimen. This can include the ever-growing active aging population. Pilates exercises, modified for armchairs are becoming more common and are specifically designed for those who may not be able to lay down on a mat or other Pilates equipment. Regardless of the reason for someone's mobility challenges, there are hundreds of exercises that can be advantageous from a seated position. In many cases, participants will notice changes right away in the way they look and feel.

In chair based Pilates, movements are performed on their own or with the assistance of resistance bands or small weights. Small props can help participants and instructors simulate many of the exercises normally done on traditional Pilates equipment with springs. The idea is to encourage ideal posture that works the all-important core muscles, and then work towards strengthening and lengthening the rest of the body as necessary.

Pilates is also a perfect modality for rehabilitation from a sports-related or other injury. The integration of the whole body has been shown to be much more effective than isolating the injury site. When a Pilates practitioner trains a client with a knee injury, the body is seen as a whole and the movement patterns are designed to strengthen the mind-body connection throughout.

Since the basis of Pilates is postural

alignment, core strength, and stability and mobility of the periphery (arms and legs), most exercise progressions begin in lying or sitting positions. Movements can begin with simple breathing exercises that focus on deep, efficient and mindful breath. The idea of focusing the mind on what the body is doing, can afford staggering benefits.

The variety of exercises available as well as the ability to modify these movement patterns allows professionals to target a specific muscle or muscle group. By changing the angle or strength of resistance, injuries can be precisely addressed. Specially designed Pilates equipment can help facilitate these adaptations. Knees, hips, shoulders and particularly the spine



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can be rehabilitated effectively on the Reformer – the most popular apparatus – as well as the Stability Chair, Cadillac Trapeze Table.

In any form and at any level, even the most rudimentary, Pilates can be a starting point, an end point or a maintenance tool for the masses. Virtually anyone can realize improvements to an array of movement dysfunctions including neurological disorders, cardiopulmonary restrictions, orthopedic complaints and a host of other physiological conditions. Now when you think of exercise, and particularly Pilates, think of a method that encompasses all individuals, no matter what their specific needs may be. **OSF**

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