

A Healthier Future with Pilates

by Jan Field-Byrne

Joseph Pilates and his Method

Millions of people around the world now practice Pilates and the number is growing day by day. Why has this system of exercise become so popular? How does it appeal to such a wide spectrum of people, from dancers and athletes to those starting exercise or rehabilitating from injury? The fact is no matter what your age or physical condition everyone can benefit from practicing Pilates.

Born in 1880 near Düsseldorf, Joseph Pilates was not always the model of health and vitality. He was a sickly child, troubled by asthma and rickets. He developed his system of exercise in order to strengthen his frail body and became both strong and flexible with extraordinary muscle definition. Using his technique he became a proficient skier, gymnast, diver and bodybuilder, well known for his work as a circus performer, boxer and self-defense instructor. He left Germany for England, and during World War I was interned as a German National; it was during this period that he started to develop some of his

innovative pieces of equipment. He was dedicated to improving the health of internees in camps and hospitals through exercise, and his methods helped many to rehabilitate physically and mentally.

The Pilate's exercise philosophy incorporates a wonderful blend of concentration on body awareness; breathing; and fluid, controlled, precise movements,. His technique requires a mental as well as physical approach to exercising. Pilate's believed that in order to achieve happiness it is imperative to gain mastery of the body. He wrote a book in 1945 to explain his theories - Return to Life - in which he claims that Mind/Body exercise, in particular his system of conditioning, can reawaken the body through movement and the mind through conscious thought. The combination resulting in revitalising the spirit crucial to wellbeing.

Spotlight on the Health Benefits

The reason for the expanding number of Pilates sessions in specialised studios, health clubs, village halls and hospitals is that the Pilates technique works. It can be practiced just about anywhere and, due to its concentrated multi-muscle nature, is time efficient. Just what the exerciser of the Millennium wants and needs.

Modern research into the results of practicing the techniques confirms what Pilates converts have long reported. One study on how Pilates movements such as the Hundred, the Roll-Up, the Double Leg Stretch, Criss Cross and Teaser compare with the basic Gym Crunch illustrate the effectiveness of doing Pilates. As reported by Michele Olson, PhD, FACSM with Carrie Myers Smith in their article, 'Pilates Exercise: Lessons From the Lab', it was found that the Pilates movements, with the exception of the Hundred, were more effective than the Gym Crunch (by significant percentages) in stimulating an increase of the muscles



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maximal output in terms of Rectus Abdominis and the External Obliques. It is also significant that the authors refer to the importance of modifying some of the movements, such as the Teaser and the Roll Up, to reduce the risk of injury to the lower back and hip flexors. This research shows that Pilates can be effective in training the abdominal tunic, but that this is not the most important result of doing Pilates regularly and correctly.

One of the key benefits has been seen in the area of lower back ache/injury - one of the most debilitating conditions in modern society and a common cause of visits to the doctor and days lost at work. A study at Florida Atlantic University, Graves, S., et al. 2005, 'The influence of Pilates-based mat exercise on chronic lower back pain, et al' produced interesting data. It reported on a group aged between 46 and 52 years that took Pilates mat exercise twice a week for 12 weeks, and a control group aged 34 to 43 that did not practice the method. All had experienced lower back pain previously. The results indicated that those practicing Pilates gained muscle strength in the lower back muscles, improved their flexibility and range of motion. There was also a significant change in body composition in those practicing Pilates. The group reduced body fat content! Researchers

are quick to say that more studies need to be done on how effective Pilates can be in helping with lower back issues, but many Pilates instructors are amazed at how the technique can provide relief and rehabilitation for back and hip problems.

The other element of the Pilates technique that has provided major health benefits is the breathing practice. The thoracic or lateral breath system that is an integral part of the



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Pilates system requires concentration and control. It is an aspect of Pilates that many students find challenging to learn but the rewards for mastering it are many.

Joseph Pilates said, 'Breathing is the first act of life. Our very life depends on it. Millions have never learned to master the art of correct breathing'. This is why he included breath control in his technique. The importance of learning to breathe deeply and fully is now being studied for its effects on lowering blood pressure and relieving stress.

Michael King of the Pilates Institute comments 'Correct breathing takes time to master. Of all the vital elements of the technique my students find this the most difficult to achieve and the last to fall into place. It is worth the effort as correct breathing ensures a good flow of oxygen to the working muscles, which cleanses and energises the whole body. It also improves concentration and aids smooth and fluid movement.'

The Pilates technique is renowned for rehabilitation of sports injuries and improves movement skills while preventing injuries. Paul Massey, a Pilates Instructor and chartered physiotherapist to the Great Britain Swimming Team for the Commonwealth Games and Olympic Games explains in his book 'Sports Pilates', 'I have been using the Pilates method in the sporting environment for a number of years. I used it in two ways: as a rehabilitation tool and as a means of performance enhancement. The Pilates method is the main component in the rehabilitation as Pilates strengthens the core areas, lengthens the spine, builds muscle tone and increases body awareness and flexibility. Furthermore, regular practice of Pilates will enhance your performance in sport and help in prevention of injuries.'

The Benefits of being a Pilates Instructor

Belinda Buttery, co-director of Pilates Training Solutions says that Pilates Teacher Training has increased significantly in the last two years. 'Instructors and clinical specialists alike are looking for career moves which will enhance their existing skills. Pilates is so specific and so rewarding; watching people recover from injury or improve their posture and overall sense of well being. It works and people love it. Once they understand

the principles and application they are with you for life'.

The UK fitness industry has benefited from the various Pilates training organisations coming together to help standardise training, and they have worked hard to get a Level 3 agreed. It is important to review any training company carefully before choosing a course. One thing that all the companies working within the

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Pilates area agree on is there will be a growing demand and incredible rewards for the competent instructor.

Learning to teach Pilates is a reward in itself. By practicing the technique fitness instructors find many of the niggling over-use syndromes with regard to knees, lower back and hips become less, or even disappear. Moving with control and precision means less wear and tear. In addition the toning of the abdominal tunic creates better posture when not exercising, as well as increased body awareness while teaching other fitness programmes, or just living life!

But the benefits are not limited to the physical as Lindsey Jackson, Yorkshire Pilates expert and presenter on several Pilates DVDs including 'Pilates for Men' suggests, 'there is a psychological benefit to teaching Pilates that shouldn't be overlooked. Good teachers are 'in state',

modeling serenity and focus for their class. Pilates equals sanity for the instructor!'

The health benefits are important, but the reason rated top of the list by most Pilates Instructors is the high level of satisfaction they enjoy from teaching it. Giving clients a way of moving that is so practical and effective, that enriches their lives beyond other fitness techniques, is very rewarding. As Moira Merrithew, co-founder of STOTT PILATES® and Master Instructor Trainer says: 'Pilates is an exercise for a lifetime. The method that works best is a contemporary, anatomically-based approach to Joseph Pilates' original exercise method which caters to people of all ages, all body types, and all fitness abilities. Therefore more people today are able to incorporate Pilates into their lives.'



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