

Pilates Principles:
Helping Patients and Clients Take Control of their Health and Live Well

The world is getting more complex everyday. People are eating more processed foods, moving less and are stressed. The result of living a standard American lifestyle is poor health and lack of wellness which includes increased rates of obesity in adults and children, increased rates of depression and other mental diseases, chronic diseases such as fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome, early degeneration and arthritis, general aches and pains, early aging, infertility and more. My mission is to empower and motivate America to be a culture where vibrant health and wellness is the norm. As physical therapists how can we help America become healthy and well? One of our most beneficial tools is Pilates. Why Pilates?

Pilates is known by mainstream America and can be used to open the door to the world of wellness for our patients and clients. Pilates can be used to bridge the gap between rehabilitation and healing the physical body to healing the whole body, mind and spirit, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and living well. The key is to educate patients and clients about the Pilates principles and then advise them to transfer these principles into their daily life.

*Two important Pilates principles that work together are *mindfulness and living in the present moment*.

At the beginning of each session I get my patients and clients to stop thinking about the day's activities and events, both past and future, and start to focus on the present moment. While they are in a resting position I ask them to close their eyes and visualize the body. I might say, "Take notice of where you are holding tension. Notice areas that you may feel discomfort or pain. Are you taking shallow quick breaths? Are your thoughts wondering? Are you engaging in negative self-talk? My goal is to make them aware of what is going on in the body and mind at the present moment. Next, I ask them to make little adjustments or modifications. "Try to relax the areas where you are holding tension. Tuck the chin to lengthen the back of the neck. Relax the jaw. Allow the posterior part of your ribs to melt into the surface. Thank yourself for coming to this session today."

I instruct my patients and clients to do this mindfulness practice every day. Take a moment once an hour and become mindful of the present state of the mind and body. Next, take the action steps that are needed to bring the body and mind into a more balanced state. These small changes create big results in the health and wellness of my patients and clients. Increased mindfulness and living in the present moment lead to a happier, healthier and more fulfilled life.

*The next Pilates principle that can help people live well is *efficient breathing*. Every patient and client benefits from education and instruction in proper breathing at the first session. The first style of breathing that I often teach is deep nostril posterior-lateral breathing. This form of breathing provides the cells with optimal levels of oxygen, it relaxes the mind and body, it increases the flexibility of the spine and thorax and it is

easy to incorporate into daily life. The nasal breath is beneficial for many reasons. It 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, making the breath go deeper and feel deeper. The majority of the oxygen exchange takes place in the lower lobes of the lungs. For optimal health every cell of the body needs to be fueled with oxygen. The deep penetration triggers the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms and relaxes the mind and body prompting better focus and concentration. Later, I challenge patients and clients with a variety of other forms of breathing and breathing exercises.

Teaching patients and clients to change their breathing style can have a huge impact in their overall health. When the cells of the body are given the oxygen they need the body and mind work more efficiently and can optimally function. Deep nasal breathing is a great tool to use in daily life to reduce stress or prevent a stressful situation. When faced with a challenging “stressful” situation my patients and clients learn to take a few deep inhales and exhales to prevent the fight or flight system from kicking in. This is the most effective way to self-manage and reduce daily stress. Preventing or reducing daily stress leads to improved health and wellness.

I link the breath with movement. I want the breath to naturally flow with every movement of the body. My yoga training is in Vinyasa Flow Yoga. An important principle in Vinyasa Flow Yoga is breath-synchronized movement where breath and movement are seamlessly united in such a way that each action encourages the other. For each movement, there is a corresponding breath. Vinyasa Flow Yoga generates the subtle, internal heat of transformation and stokes agni fire. Agni is the digestive fires used not only to digest physical food but also experiences and sensations. If our fire is strong we can better adapt to life’s challenges.

**Next are the very important principles of proper alignment and posture and movement from the core.*

After doing a thorough assessment of my patient’s and client’s static and dynamic musculoskeletal system, alignment, posture, body mechanics and ergonomics I begin to reeducate them in how to properly align and use their body. Pilates is an effective tool to educate clients about the anatomy and biomechanics of the body. Through Pilates my clients learn how to properly align the spine and every joint of the body. They learn how to properly position each joint, what muscles to use or not use to move a joint, how to properly engage or relax muscles and how to coordinate these various actions.

The Pilates apparatus provides assistance to my patients and clients when they are learning how to properly use their body. The apparatus allows them to correctly perform movements that they would not be able to do without the apparatus. By repeating these therapeutic movements I work with my clients to train specific patterns of movement and produce desired outcomes such as improved joint flexibility, muscle length and muscle strength. Over time the muscles and joints will automatically perform movements properly and this will carry over into their activities of daily living, work activities and recreational activities.

After clients can perform proper movements on the Pilates apparatus I often transition them to more dynamic functional Gyrotonic exercises and Vinyasa Flow Yoga series. Gyrotonic exercise has an emphasis away from confinement. It works on opening the body and mind. It includes more three-dimensional motions and relies on both imagery and anatomic specificity. It utilizes fluid circular movement patterns, rhythmical breathing and proper body mechanics. This statement from www.gyrotonic.com sums up Gyrotonic exercise: “It is a complete system of movement that originates from the spine and follows the natural energy lines in the body to build internal and external strength.”

Proper alignment of the skeletal system allows for proper alignment of the muscles and therefore, optimal engagement of the core muscles. I instruct my patients and clients to 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 abdomens in the front and the multifidus in the back. For optimal function, the two diaphragms float directly above and below one another. This proper alignment will influence function, breathing performance, stability of the spine and freedom of movement.

Once we have proper alignment we can optimally engage the stabilizers of the spine. First, I bring their awareness to the muscles. Next, I teach them how to engage them properly. Finally, we work on maintaining their engagement during exercise, activities of daily living and recreational activities. I instruct my clients to visualize an optimal pyramid. When transverse abdominis and multifidus are properly supporting the top of the pelvis and lumbar spine, the posterior pelvic floor muscles can relax. This relaxation allows for decompression of the ischial tuberosities and therefore, a nice wide base of support. When transverse abdominis and multifidus are not working properly the posterior pelvic floor muscles overwork and compress the base of the pyramid creating an inverted pyramid. When patients and clients learn to move from their center, their whole world changes. Here are a few comments they have made: “I feel strong, balanced, confident and empowered.” “I can breathe better.” “I have more energy and endurance to do the things that I want to do in life.” “When I maintain proper posture and move from my center my aches and pains go away.”

*The final Pilates principle that I want to mention is *flow*.

After learning 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 just allows the body to naturally move through its proper ranges of motion. An intense connection of the mind and body is required to experience this flow.

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. Things just start to go your way. It begins to feel like the world is on your side and working with you to accomplish your goals. The right things happen at the right time in your everyday life. For instance, you may run into an old friend the day after you quit your job and she just happens to mention a fabulous business opportunity. Things just happen the way they are supposed

to. This type of advanced wellness takes time to develop but it is another example of the amazing link between the principles of Pilates and the principles of achieving health and wellness.

I hope this article inspires you to not only start or continue your journey to wellness but to use the Pilates principles to encourage your patients to take control of their health and live well.