

TRUE TO THE CORE

Pilates IS MORE THAN USING CURIOUS OBJECTS AND MACHINES TO HELP YOU ACHIEVE A MORE BALANCED BODY. A STUDENT-TURNED-INSTRUCTOR DESCRIBES HOW LEARNING PILATES REVOLUTIONIZED HER PERCEPTIONS ABOUT BODY MOVEMENT – AND HOW IT CAN CHANGE YOURS.

by Karen Dadourian

TEARING MY HAMSTRING MUSCLE WHILE RUNNING 30 years ago changed the course of my life. When you tear a hamstring, it's a six-month recovery, and there's very little you can do until the muscle heals. I was a committed runner and worried about how I could continue exercising. A friend suggested that I go to the Houston Ballet Academy, near where I lived then, and try this odd thing they were doing. It turned out to be my very first Pilates lesson.

Since no one there taught what are now known as “mat classes,” I was introduced to Pilates through machine work – low-impact exercises using equipment with fantastic names like “the Universal Reformer” and “the Cadillac,” which stressed balance, alignment, and endurance. As the instructors taught me the basics, I discovered



The Pilates Universal Reformer uses resistance to precisely work the body to develop good alignment, core strength, and flexibility.

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INSIDE THE WORLD
OF JOSEPH PILATES

something amazing: Despite my injury, not only was I continuing to move my body, I also was finding myself growing stronger and more flexible. I went to the studio about five times a week, and I realized that Pilates was not just an exercise — it was a lifestyle.

As early as my initial lessons, I noticed an immediate mind-body connection. I was intrigued by how I could combine my breathing with movement. This challenged my strength and flexibility. While I was doing Pilates, I found that I was only concentrating on my form and that the concerns of my daily life just faded away.

Pilates helped me gain a greater understanding of how my body moved — which in turn changed how I held my body outside the studio. For example, I was suddenly conscious of how I sat when I drove and how my shoulders

Yes, there really was a Pilates. Joseph Pilates (1883–1967) was a German acrobat and boxer living in England when he developed “Contrology,” a program that he called “the comprehensive integration of body, mind, and spirit.” Today, we call this exercise regime “Pilates” in homage to its creator. An ardent student of physical fitness, Pilates sampled everything from yoga and gymnastics to bodybuilding and self-defense. At the outbreak of World War I, when he was forced into several internment camps, he taught his fellow German nationals what is now known as “mat work” to keep strong. For the infirm, he devised resistance systems using equipment on hand, such as hospital beds, bedsprings, and beer keg rings. You see these prototypes manifested today in the Cadillac (or Trapeze Table), Universal Reformer, and the Magic Circle. His legacy of reawaking our bodies through movement and our minds through conscious thought continues.

were positioned as I walked. I learned that moving should not be a strain; it should come naturally. Pilates helps the practitioner find that natural movement.

I was hooked. A decade after my injury, I became a Pilates instructor.

When people think of Pilates they often think of the lingo — terms like “the core.” But what exactly is your “core?” It’s not just your abdominal muscles, as most people assume, but rather your whole abdominal section — from your highest abdominals in your sternum right under your bra line to your upper thighs, both front and back. Think of your core as a big corset that wraps around this section and interacts with your diaphragm. In Pilates, this is referred to as your “powerhouse.”

If you have practiced yoga, you will notice that many of the body positions in Pilates mat work seem familiar. The difference is that with Pilates, there’s active movement within the positions. You’re challenging your stability and moving fluidly within each position.

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KAREN DADOURIAN'S RECOMMENDED DVD:
PILATES INTERMEDIATE MAT WORKOUT
WITH ANA CABAN (GAIAM).
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There are smooth transitions from one exercise to another — and no rest breaks. The benefits, among many, include improved muscle tone, increased flexibility, better posture, and a trimmer physique. The basic tenets are breathing, balance, control, and body awareness.

Breathing. When you breathe during Pilates, you want to fill your body as deeply as you can with oxygen. So, your inhale breath tends to be long, and you fill your rib cage. Most people breathe shallowly and don't pay much attention to it. If nothing else, people should connect breath with movement. Try this: Inhale deeply, placing your hand at your bra line so you can feel the motion. As you exhale, fold your ribs in, compressing your chest and pulling in your upper abdominals. Breathing this way also works your obliques. Feel that? Try again. Get your whole rib cage and torso involved. This breathing pushes the oxygen deeper into your body. In Pilates, as you move through the positions, you want to use that breath to expand each movement. When I teach, I want to hear my students breathe. I tell them, "Not so quiet, please!"

Balance. The lifting of the powerhouse muscles creates balance in the body. Years ago, one of my trainers cited the statistic that women lose about 2 percent of their balance every year. This is why I started to include a few minutes of balance in my mat work.

Control. Control is necessary both at the beginning and at the end of each movement in Pilates. And when your body learns to move with control, you find yourself becoming more confident and pay more attention to details in every facet of your life.

Body Awareness. The reason you do Pilates is that it changes your awareness of how you use your body. Becoming aware of how your body moves means knowing where your center of gravity is, and thus, achieving balance. Try this:

Reach out your arm as if you were grabbing something. Did you know that a proper reach actually extends from your shoulder blade? It does not come from your wrist or elbow. When done correctly, you reach from the muscles across your spine — and that will feel more comfortable than using your wrist, which would be put in a strained position.

How are you sitting right now? Most people carry their tension in their upper shoulders and neck. They hunch over and lose abdominal structure. Pilates creates the feeling of opening up through your center; you keep your shoulders down and relaxed, and your neck long. Think of your spine like a ribbon — one continuous column. Strengthening the muscles that wrap around the spine helps to support the back and reduce pain, which is why Pilates is an especially good exercise for people with back pain. Its benefits also carry over into other activities, such as weight training, tennis, and golf.

To achieve the full advantages of Pilates, you should commit to 45 minutes to one hour twice a week. Start by taking classes so that an instructor can teach you the basics before you try a DVD at home. Once you learn about 20 minutes of positions, you can do the exercises on your own and supplement what you do at home with classes. If you're a beginner, don't expect to be able to do everything, but don't be intimidated either. Classes tend to move briskly, but students are encouraged to go at their own rate. If you find that a position is difficult or does not feel good, just stop and stretch. The class will move on to another position in a moment. Pilates is not about vast repetition; you are working to improve your mastery of a position, not achieve a certain quantity.

The reason I stay with Pilates is that it changes the way I do everything else. My mind and body strive as one. And once you discover that knowledge, there is no going back. *

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