



Pilates: A Mindful Method to Reduce Stress

by Christine Romani-Ruby

Life constantly presents changes and challenges that promote learning, growth and optimal function. People usually respond and adapt to these changes and challenges. However, when people lose their capacity to successfully respond and adapt, a condition of negative stress results. This form of stress has been connected to the onset of many diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, immune system problems, poor wound healing, and musculoskeletal pain. The Pilates method is a successful tool for self-management of the stress reaction and can be an integral part of a wellness coaching profit center.

Joseph Pilates (the founder of the Pilates method) defined his work with six principles, in 1920, that are remarkably similar to today's proven methods of managing stress. Members are looking to the fitness center for total health and well-being. Their lives are stressful and there is little time for reflection and relaxation. Using Pilates principles, you can successfully help your clients reduce the negative stress in their lives, and make a plan for a regular fitness program that will not only keep them physically fit, but will help them reduce the negative effects of life stressors.

The first of the Pilates principles is relaxation. Joseph Pilates always said that in Pilates, one must move without tenseness. This means that, the exercise is performed recruiting only the muscles needed for the activity. All other muscles remain relaxed. Through Pilates, one learns selective relaxation of muscles not required for the task at hand. Verbal cueing and physical touch are incorporated by a Pilates instructor to create selective relaxation.

The second Pilates principle is breath. Diaphragmatic breathing is a vital part of every stress management program. It is also one of the primary principles in the

Pilates work. Diaphragmatic breathing presents moment awareness into peoples' busy lives. It reminds them to experience life in the present moment, and allows them time to recognize distress and choose an alternative response. The Pilates instructor encourages diaphragmatic breathing by cueing a deep inhalation into the lungs with expansion of the ribcage, and by cueing the navel to the spine on the exhalation. Pilates class participants can learn this technique and take it with them to use when under stress at work, or in their daily lives.

The Pilates principle of concentration is similar to a common stress management technique called progressive relaxation. In this technique, one learns muscle awareness and relaxation by contracting and relaxing different muscle groups. In Pilates exercise, the muscle groups contract and relax in specific patterns. Joseph said to concentrate on the correct movement each time you exercise. Master the movements to the point of subconscious reaction. The Pilates instructor again uses specific verbal cues to encourage concentration in the participant.

Guided imagery is a method of stress reduction that teaches relaxation by imagining yourself in a calm and peaceful place. The method of Pilates is taught with imagery. The instructor generally does not perform the exercises with you. The instructor may ask you to bring each vertebra to the floor like a string of pearls being dropped, or to reach out your leg as if you were drawing on the ceiling. In traditional exercise programs, the teacher does the exercises with the participants and at times, we see a mimicking of the instructor rather than a full reproduction of the movement. The participant often "shuts off his mind" and just does the movements. Pilates instructors describe the movement verbally and the class produces it. With Pilates instruction, you will have the opportunity to offer your

members fitness programs as well as life-coaching that will enhance their ability to deal with life stressors.

The above methods can be described with the term mindfulness. Mindfulness enhances a person's quality of life with an invitation to live in the present moment, reducing the effects of negative stress. When we are mindful, our full attention is "in the here and now." These methods can be an important component of a wellness program and can enhance the life coaching component of your program.

What we think we know can be the biggest obstacle in mindfulness. Even though Pilates has been around for years, it is a very new technique to the general population. The equipment is foreign: the movements are foreign. The Pilates instructor is able to take away the preconceived ideas, concepts and expectations. The participant meets the world with a "beginners mind" and a willingness to see things as if for the first time. This is a true benefit to the Pilates instructor as the students will listen and follow more openly. The Pilates repertoire provides the instructor with the necessary tools to empower participants to listen to themselves in a healthy healing manner, and to avoid the stress reaction.

To experience a free 15-minute Pilates workout designed to reduce stress at work, please go to <http://tinyurl.com/yyzfc9>. For instructor education and innovative ways to begin or enhance your Pilates program visit www.phipilates.com. **CS**

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