

Pilates, Unifying the Body and Mind

In the mid-1930s, a pamphlet was published called "Your Health". It was written by a fifty-year old man who had very different ideas about how the field of medicine should approach human health. While this may sound like just another voice in a crowd of people all shouting their complaints at the short falls of "modern" Orthodox medicine, his message was truly different.

He had three primary criticisms. I say primary because he has made numerous detailed criticisms, but they can be summarized into three main areas. The first is that the scientific medical community has failed to adequately define "normal health". He argued that medicine simply studied a large group of people. If all of these people shared a similar ailment, that ailment would be considered "normal" if it didn't cause immediate pain or disability.

The second criticism was that the modern medical community focused too strongly on curing diseases, rather than preventing them. Instead of understanding the factors in a person's life that cause that disease to manifest, the field of medicine focuses their financial and material resources to developing expensive, and sometimes ineffective, cures for disease.

The third criticism was that the lifestyle the medical community was advocating went against the common sense laws of nature and that because mankind was being conditioned to violate his own nature, from as early as childhood, that it was creating a downward spiral of human health.

Anyone who has even a shallow understanding of the medical community should find these insights fascinating, especially since these views were published in the 1930s, but more alarming is that these views are surprisingly accurate and still hold water today almost 80 years later.

The man who wrote these words was named Joseph Hubertus Pilates, a German immigrant born in the last month of 1883. This man had an intimate knowledge of the medical industry since he was born a sickly child often afflicted with various maladies including rickets, and asthma. Thankfully, he was born to very health conscious parents, his father, an award-winning gymnast, and his mother, a working naturopath, undoubtedly influenced his understanding of health and medicine.

It wasn't until his teenage years that he was able to overcome his weaknesses. He not only overcame, but also supremely conquered them. He led a very active lifestyle: gymnastics, diving, bodybuilding, boxing, and even as a circus-performer in England in his late 20s. He even made a living as a self-defense instructor for British law enforcement.

During WW1, despite his services to the British law enforcement, being a German citizen he was sent to a detainment camp on the Isle of Man for the duration of the war. It was in these years that he made use of his time by studying fitness and conducting health and exercise experiments on his fellow inmates. It was during this time that the idea for his physical fitness philosophy "Contrology" was born.

Contrology is the idea that in order for ideal health to be achieved, there has to be an appropriate synergy between the body and the mind. Exercise for the sake of exercise is worthless and mental improvement while neglecting one's physical health is likewise problematic. When exercise is done with the appropriate balance of mental coordination being used to create a healthy level of physical fitness that is when health and happiness can occur.

Today "contrology" is known by a different name: Pilates. This name, however, should include a caveat. Because of a legal decision made over the use of the term "Pilates" as a trademark, anyone can use the phrase "Pilates" freely whether they have credentials or not. The result is that there are a lot of untrained and uncertified individuals calling their methodology "Pilates" when it may bear little or no resemblance to the true classical Pilates method.

Because of the broad and uninhibited use of the term "Pilates" numerous misconceptions and false ideas about Pilates have developed and it is important to be able to distinguish classical Pilates from other forms of low impact exercise and physical therapy.

One of the most common misconceptions is that Pilates and Yoga are basically the same thing. While they do share some similarities, they are a number of major differences. Both commonly use mat exercises and focus on smooth motions and deliberate breathing, Yoga in the US is typically a highly Westernized form of Hindu meditation that focuses on holding specific stances and poses with controlled breathing techniques. While

the goal of yoga is to reach a higher spiritual state, the goal of Pilates is to create an increased level of physical fitness and create a strong body/mind connection.

Classical Pilates focuses on developing the "powerhouse" a Pilates term for the collection of muscles in abdominal region from which all body strength and energy emanates from. This energy and strength is directed by the mind to be used in steady, deliberate movements, each one with the purpose to improve body posture, lengthen muscle, and straighten the spine. The goal is not to create large muscles and maximize lifting power. Large muscles do not indicate optimum health, or increased mental clarity and coordination. Pilates does not utilize rapid repetitions of movements, but instead focuses on performing single, perfect, deliberate movements that require sustained mental coordination and considerable control of energy from the powerhouse.

BENEFITS FROM PILATES

- Increased Muscle Strength and Function
- Higher Flexibility
- Improved Posture
- Improved Body Coordination
- Pain Relief for Sciatica and other back related pains.
- Pain Relief in Hips, Legs and Feet
- Improved Spine Alignment in Scoliosis
- Increased Range of Motion
- Improved Circulation

The results of this method are typically increased flexibility, improved body posture, increased core strength and stamina, improved mind/body coordination, and increased mental acuity. Often, these attributes are highly desired by dancers and individuals who use their bodies to perform. While it is true that the Pilates method did originate, and become extremely popular, with the dancing and art communities in New York City in the 20s and 30s, this does not mean that only women and dancers can benefit from these exercises. Athletes from all disciplines can benefit from the increased mind/body coordination, as well as the improved body dynamics. Straighter spines mean stronger spines. Stronger cores mean more power available to execute maneuvers faster and more accurately.

Another critical element of the Pilates method is breathing. Proper breathing technique is essential to maximizing the benefits of the Pilates exercises. The majority of people have developed poor and improper breathing habits. Breathing too shallow, breathing too slowly or too quickly. Pilates developed a whole series of exercises that retrain people how to breathe properly. Increasing oxygen supply to the body not only helped improve circulation, but he believed it helped to cleanse the body, both in the literal and figurative senses.

Proper breathing included taking strong deep breaths, while expanding the lungs from the abdomen first and then allowing the lungs to fill from the bottom, then expelling the breath with a slight amount of force until the lungs were empty to maximize the release of the unwanted carbon dioxide. This breathing

is typically used simultaneously with deliberate and smooth exercises and helps create proper body rhythm.

Joe Pilates stated his goal plainly when he said that he wanted the physical prowess of man to equal his intellectual accomplishments. The pinnacle of “sound body, sound mind” is a man that has perfect mental control over a body that is at the physical level to execute any of those commands.

Today, the disciples of Joe Pilates and their students have been improving people’s lives all across the world. They employ the original mat exercises, as well as through the use of special exercise equipment designed by Joe Pilates. One of the most commonly used machines is the Reformer which uses springs, natural body resistance, and gravity to help improve flexibility, increase core strength, and improve overall health.

The elements of Pilates are both physical and mental. Improving one without the other is to deny yourself happiness, because in the end, how happy can you truly be without your good health?

For more information please feel free to contact our Pilates instructor Eva Kovacs at 818-907-6037.



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