

Pilates for Every Type of Body

When we think of clients who need to lose weight, Pilates may not jump to mind. Often, instructors think that it isn't a "fit enough" for the group and discourage participation. But the benefits of Pilates are for EVERY body and every body type.

20 years ago, my naturopath, Carol – who was obese – asked me if I would teach her Pilates. Hesitantly, I agreed, sharing my concerns that I had never trained anyone her size and that I would probably make a lot of mistakes. But if she was willing, we could give it a go.

The day of the first lesson, Carol took a long time coming down the stairs into my studio and arrived seriously out of breath. As we did her intake, she emphatically told me that she was not concerned, or really even that motivated to lose weight. She said she would not do anything else, even walking, and that she was just interested because it was mindful. And so we began.

I did make a lot of mistakes with Carol, and she taught me so much. We were easy with one another and that was a real gift as I never worried about asking her how something felt or if she had enough room. I followed the axioms of "when in doubt, leave it out" and err on the side of caution. The order, as always, was my framework.

So what did her lesson look like? It looked like Pilates on a very large person.

We started on the Cadillac for mat with a wedge. Today, I would use a Flexcushion because the feedback is better as the foam is firmer. We adhered to the introductory order, but

performed it with added in fundamentals, stretches, building blocks and prop use. Fundamentals were given as homework.

For example, with the Hundred, her head was down, knees were bent and feet were on the mat. She pumped her arms as she breathed in for three and out for three. Roll Up was not possible, in its place she performed the Fundamentals Rib Cage Arms and Pelvic Lifts. One Leg Circle was preceded by knee stirs and stretches and then supported with a Dynaband. And all through the classical introductory order, we improvised like Jazz musicians.

Carol did not fit perfectly on my classical Peak Pilates reformers. Her arms had nowhere to go. But that was okay. I put a short box pole across her pelvis and placed her hands on it. Instinctively, I acted like everyone did this and told her it was her leveling pole, and her job was to keep it level. Exercises were sequenced to limit up and down, which was hard for her. Her Short Box Series was performed initially sitting on the side of the reformer with a sponge ball between her knees and the pole in her hand. After a few months, she was up on the box. It took quite a while to build up to Elephant and gain the confidence to stand on the reformer, but we got there. Her knee stretches were surprisingly good!

When it came time for Running, she did indeed run! It was a place to work on some stamina so we did our first reps at a walk and got the form. Then we came in and went back out and did the second set at a jog, and finally on the third, we “ran around the park.” This helped her build her endurance and reserves and sparked some comments and laughs. Pelvic lift was performed with the pelvis down. And this is where the workout stayed for quite some time as she built awareness, stability, strength and stamina.

Some good guidelines for very large bodies on the reformer:

- Adjust the equipment to the best of your ability; move

it out to create space.

- Use pillows and other props as needed.
- Help students enter and exit the reformer by putting the foot bar down and out of the way.
- Think about the spring settings, and when making choices factor in if they are assisting or resisting mostly in the exercise.
- Introduce exercises such as Arm Springs and Frog and Leg Circles on the tower first.
- Let students connect and enjoy the flow. Give them the feel of the reformer.

Part C was planned in advance and setup. I never removed the handles from the high chair in front of her when I introduced Pumping, they were off when she arrived. We worked on a variety of equipment to meet her goals, balance her body, and stimulate her mind and body. Sometimes Carol was nervous that the equipment would not support her. I would limit the range of motion and slowly enlarge it as her confidence built. For example, in the Roll Back on the Cadillac, I used a really high wedge. Gradually, we worked lower and lower until she was on a small wedge happily rolling up and down.

Part D was exactly like anyone else's at first the Wall Series and some balance work because she needed that. Later, the Power Circle came into play.

Here are some good guidelines for working with obese clients:

- Get clearance from the client's physician to participate in Pilates.
- Have all props ready and equipment adjusted when student arrives.
- Make it a goal to keep students moving as much as possible. When they are tired, add stretches in or fundamentals and preparatory movements.
- Watch student closely for signs of over-exertion.
- Be creative with prop selection to assist and support.

- Take care with your own biomechanics and touch so that you do not get hurt.
- Sequence exercises to limit up and down positional changes.
- Touch. Often obese individuals feel “untouchable,” provide touch to guide and support movements as you would do for any other student.
- Remember that every student is different, so do not make assumptions.

Did Carol benefit from the classical order? Tremendously! After just a few weeks of Pilates, she said, “You know, I didn’t know if this would work. Before when I moved, I felt like I was dragging my body after me. Now when I move, it moves with me.” When I moved away and was no longer able to teach Carol, she continued taking lessons with a teacher I had trained.

Over the years, I have had so many memorable obese clients, learning from each and every one of them. It is an honor to work with each of these individuals, to learn from them, and to help bring the joy of movement to their bodies.

If you would like to learn more, join Zoey at the Pilates for Overweight & Obese session at [PMA 2019](#) on October 25th in Monterey, California!