

# Ask the Expert: Managing Stress with Pilates

*By Zoey Trap, MSc*

Recently, I did an informal survey of all of my Pilates students, both group and private. I asked them to list their top three goals for their Pilates practice, and I was surprised to see that one of the biggest goals among students was managing stress. Not only did this amaze me, it got me thinking about how to help my students more effectively manage their stress.

Stress is an inevitable part of every life. Our society is in constant motion, full of change, demands and money worries. Then, before you know it, the holidays come along and we have even more stressors added to the mix. Stress can be acute or chronic, and chronic stress leads to health issues. Dr. Hans Selye was the first to define the term stress as the “nonspecific response of the body to any demands made upon it.” A stressor is any physical, psychological or environmental trigger or condition that initiates the stress response. But stress is not all bad; it can lead to creative bursts, enhanced motivation and improved moral, as well as provide a higher energy level and increased stamina. However, when stress becomes chronic over time, we are living in a “fight or flight” mode. This increases cortisol secretions that can suppress immune function, increase heart rate and blood pressure and can lead to weight gain, fatigue and even exhaustion. (Anspaugh, 2000)

Sometimes, stress can feel contagious. A student comes rushing in the door late for class, can't settle in and the whole class can pick up that vibe. Maybe you too! As Pilates instructors, we want to treat the whole student, to help them toward health and happiness and the good news is we can be

instrument that leads to change. When we think of dealing with stress we think of relaxing, breathing, meditating, and indeed these are great choices; however, exercise is also a great choice. Exercise alters the brain chemistry and increases endorphins. Research shows that exercise can reduce the severity of the stress response, shorten the recovery time from the stressor and diminish vulnerability to stress related disease (Anspaugh, 2000). Pilates already has so much going for it as a de-stress option and following are some suggestions for working with the Pilates Principles to create not only an exercise session, but a moving meditation to uplift mind, body and spirit.

## **Breathing**

*“Learn to breathe correctly.” Joseph Pilates*

A smooth and constant flow of the breath, deep inward and outward breaths help to begin class and lower anxiety. Instead of diving right in to moving, take some time to add deep breathing techniques. One good one is Mary Bowen’s 10-count breath. Breathe in slowly for 10 counts, and breathe out completely for 10 counts. Not only will your students be more relaxed, they will be more connected to their breath and their body. Add the suggestion that they breathe in positive energy and breathe out stress and negativity.

**Do** once you get moving focus on the exhalation especially during the breathing exercises like Spine Stretch Forward, Saw, Mermaid and more.

**Don’t** get hung up on the breath and don’t let students get hung up on the breath.

## **Centering**

*“Being centered means having a reference point, a place to come back to when life and emotions and stress push you off balance.”*

*-Dr. Carol Robin*

Dropping into our center can be a physical action in which we connect to our Powerhouse, a mental action where we focus inward, or an emotional action when we become “grounded”. Regular practice can result in our finding our center and in knowing how to return to our center when we are forced off balance. In a Pilates class, this centering activity can begin with a few fundamentals such as ISO-Abs or Knee Folds and be carried out throughout the class when we continue to focus on moving from the center. It can be as simple as just creating some time at the beginning for students to drop into themselves and let go of the demands of daily life.

**Do** teach Powerhouse to Powerhouse to ground both you and your students.

**Don't** bring your own woes into the studio with you. Leave your problems at the door.

## **Concentration**

*“Concentrate on the correct movements EACH TIME YOU EXERCISE, let you do them improperly and thus lose all the vital benefits of their value.”*

*-Joseph Pilates*

When we keep the focus on the work, our students stay focused on the work. In essence, we create a moving meditation linking breath, movement and intention, which all begin with concentration.

**Do** use an economy of words that helps students focus on what is important and stay in the moment

**Don't** chat during the workout.

# Control

*“The Pilates Method teaches you to be in control of your body and not at its mercy.”*

*-Suzanne Farrell*

What is the alternative to being in control? Being out of control. In life, so much happens that is beyond our control. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control how we react to what happens to us. Romana said Pilates could be described in three words: strength, stretch and control. Working with control does not mean rigidity; instead it means promoting fluidity as we perform movements that have a beginning, a middle and an end.

**Do** remind students to work with muscle not momentum.

**Don't** be a control freak. Be present with your students, aware of their bodies, their faces, their moods and be with them in Pilates for the entire hour. For every class, there is the class you planned to give, the class you actually gave, and the class you wish you would have given. Be gentle with yourself as you evaluate your classes and sessions and plan for the next.

# Precision

*“Concentrate on the right movements each time you exercise else you will do them improperly and lose the value.”*

*-Joseph Pilates*

Pilates is a practice, and one of the things we are practicing is precision. Placement of the body, as well as the execution and refinement of the movement patterns, all come from learning to play the instrument of our body using the notes of Pilates.

**Do** teach to the student's stage of learning. Beginners need to learn gross movement patterns, intermediate students work on corrections that go beyond gross errors, and advanced students are working on refinements and variations.

**Don't** forget to manage your expectations. When we expect too much from our student (or not enough), the lesson falls flat and the student is left feeling more stressed out and deflated than before. When we don't expect enough our student is not invigorated and inspired by the work. "Patience and persistence are vital qualities in the ultimate successful accomplishment of any worthwhile endeavor," said Joseph Pilates! This is a good reminder for both students and teachers.

## **Flowing Movement**

*"Change happens through movement and movement heals."*

*-Joseph Pilates*

As teachers, we act as the maestro; we help students to move seamlessly to round the corners and to flow from the first breath of the workout to the last. When we orchestrate that flow, the work becomes focused as there is no time for chatting, no opportunity for losing track of where we are, and we become magical, musical and one with the work.

**Do** help students find the joy of movement by letting them move!

**Don't** rush or drag the work, find a balance that challenges the student. Unlock the rhythms of each exercise to help them experience the work more fully.

## **References**

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