

Exercise Breakdown | Semicircle: 180 Degrees of Spinal Separation

By Suzanne Meledeo

The “six degrees of separation” theory purports that every person on the planet is connected by knowing six or fewer people. Thinking about this got me mulling over the concept of spinal articulation and how important it is for proper posture and alignment. Joseph Pilates once said “A man is as young as his spinal column.” I always strive to create as much separation as I possibly can between the vertebrae in my spine. It is absolutely one of my favorite things about Pilates. So I realized that I want more than six degrees of separation; I want 180 degrees of spinal separation, and what better way to find that kind of articulation than with Semicircle?

To be honest, Semicircle is not my favorite exercise to teach. Shocking, right? But as I was thinking about articulation in the spine and all the Pilates exercises that focus on it, I kept coming back to Semicircle. Why do I shy away from it when it is really such a delicious exercise? I find myself making lame excuses to leave it out such as “it’s too complicated to teach today” or “my clients get stuck on the [reformer](#) at the end of exercises when they wear sleeveless shirts.” There are a myriad of silly reasons I can come up with to justify my desire to not include it, but none are good enough to leave out such an important articulation and stretching exercise.

I know I’m not alone in this feeling. I have talked with many other [instructors](#) who feel the same way about Semicircle. In truth, don’t we all have one or two of those exercises? Ones that we find difficult to articulate or perhaps execute

ourselves?

What if, instead of coming up with reasons to leave out an exercise, we go in search of reasons why we should include it? What if we could learn to truly appreciate it and find a new way to articulate and teach the exercise so that we can guide our clients to successful execution? What if we worked on it in our own practice to ensure we have mastered it fully in our own body?

Understanding (the first 60 degrees)

What are the goals of Semicircle?

Goal #1: Spinal articulation – As I mentioned above, I absolutely love creating space between the vertebrae. So why would I balk at the idea of teaching or executing Semicircle? Each direction of this exercise creates 180 degrees of spinal separation allowing for full articulation of the spine. Essentially, you are creating a half-circle of movement in the spine on each repetition.

Goal #2: Opening the chest and stretching the back muscles – As you melt the sternum to roll through the spine, you open up the chest. When you articulate bone-by-bone until the pelvis touches springs, it stretches the muscles in the back in a glorious manner. Try it out while focus on these stretches.

Goal #3: Thigh Stretch – The reward at the end of the exercise is an amazing thigh stretch. By reaching for the heels, lifting the hips up and reaching out through the knees, you just may discover a new favorite way to stretch the quads.

Now who would want to leave out an exercise like this from their in their Pilates practice?!

Executing (the second 60 degrees):

Begin by working on perfecting your own execution of

Semicircle. If we can't execute it properly then how can we fully appreciate and teach the exercise?

Part #1: Keeping the carriage still – This is always a struggle for clients, but when the carriage can be kept still, it indicates that they are moving with control. Master this control in your body so you can relate to your clients as they progress through the stages of learning.

- Can you lift your hips up over your heels, pressing out with long straight arms without moving the carriage?
- Can you hold the carriage still as you start to sequentially roll through the spine?
- Does the carriage stay still when you lift the hips after the initial articulation on the first direction?
- Can you press the carriage out on the second direction and hold it still as you articulate through the spine?

Part #2: Full articulation – The real beauty of this exercise is revealed in the 180 degrees of spinal separation. Without it, this exercise loses its purpose.

- Are you fully articulating your spine in this exercise, melting the chest and rolling through the spine, one vertebra at a time, finally dropping the hips down to the springs for the lumbar stretch?
- Do you have sticky spots in your spine? If so, work on creating space in your own practice with the plethora of exercises we have at our disposal for this.

Teaching (the final 60 degrees):

Tip #1: Patience – Don't rush it. Watch your clients as they progress through the Level I exercises. How is their spine articulation in exercises like short spine massage, roll back, breathing, or rolling stomach massage? Are they controlling movement from their powerhouse? Have they worked out the majority of sticky spots in their spine? Are they able to pick

their hips up in Shoulder Bridge and sustain the lift as they lower and lift the leg and control the roll through the spine back into the mat?

Tip #2: Touch Technique – We require the touch technique for Semicircle as a part of the Peak Pilates® Level II curriculum because it works. As you guide their movement, rolling through the spine and providing support and aid as they lift their hips without moving the carriage, you will help them understand the exercise and feel successful from the very first time you teach it.

Tip #3: Economy of Words – Semicircle can be tricky to articulate. There are a lot of things happening in the exercise, and it can be difficult to get the words out in a concise manner while staying in the rhythm of the exercise, rounding the corner and guiding them. If you find yourself struggling with this, record yourself teaching the exercise, observe other [instructors](#), listen to their words and then work on finding your own words. Sometimes you may try things that don't work, and that is okay. Just try it a different way the next time you teach!

180 degrees of spinal separation complete

After spending time studying Semicircle, working on it in my personal practice and teaching it daily to my clients over the last week, my eyes have been opened to its importance. I have come to appreciate it in a whole new way! This exercise is a reward for all the previous work in the classical order and provides you with much needed a stretch. I now look forward to it! If you can cultivate your own love for the exercises, your client will see that shining through your teaching and they will get excited too!

Remember to trust the process. Joe said in *Return to Life Through Contrology*, "Study carefully. Do not sacrifice knowledge to speed in building your solid exercise regime on

the foundation of Contrology. Follow instructions exactly as indicated down to the very smallest detail. There IS a reason!"