

Pilates for the Overweight Client

By Zoey Trap, MS

All of the benefits that healthy clients gain from Pilates are also available to overweight and obese students (Cakmakci, 2012). Learning how to think about larger bodies and how they relate to Pilates exercises, equipment and [props](#) can provide you with mindful solutions that will improve quality of life for a population in need.

According to a recent study, 34.9% of adults in the U.S. are obese. Obesity not only increases the risk of heart disease stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers, but it also impacts quality of life. When obese students begin to discover the joy of movement, the door is often open to other healthy lifestyle changes. For the Pilates instructor who is interested in working with this population, there is much to learn to keep your client safe, progressing and inspired.

One of greatest obstacles for an overweight student is not feeling comfortable to get out there and try a new, challenging activity. So be understanding; compliment them on their interest in doing something new and focus on what they can do rather than what they cannot. Don't be afraid to talk to them about how a set up works for them and what they are feeling when they start out. As you work together, notice and compliment their progress.

When creating a lesson plan that factors in a student's fitness, Pilates experience, personal goals and weight distribution, use the 4 S's: stability, strength, stamina and stretch to evaluate your students' areas of opportunity. Many overweight students lack stamina, so plan ways to keep your students moving as much as possible, but within their

capabilities (Cakmakci, 2012). As you plan your exercises, plan the use of your props to provide support and a greater connection to the Powerhouse. Think of ways to keep the student in motion for the entire hour without over-taxing them. Add in fundamentals and extra stretches to keep the student engaged in body and mind.

Key Points for Working with Overweight Clients

- Consider weight distribution and offer appropriate support. If students are heavy in the chest, elevate the head and shoulders. If students are heavy in the legs, support the legs when they are lifted. If students carry weight around the abdomen, assist them in lifting up and over this area.
- While every client is unique, certain muscle imbalances are common among overweight students (Fabris et al., 2005). In general, overweight students have tight lateral hip rotators and hip flexors with corresponding weak abdominals, inner thighs and gluteals (Fabris et al., 2005). Incorporate strategies for correcting initiation and stabilization and help students toward correct motor patterns and improved muscle balance. For example, a small ball or a power circle can help activate the inner thighs and improve the centerline. A yoga strap can also provide leg support and a theraband can improve the heel-to-seat connection.
- Use a wide variety of props to offer support, facilitate movement patterns and provide greater proprioceptive feedback. Have all the props you will need for a session before your student arrives.
- Build the basics by supplementing the exercises. Use fundamentals throughout the session to provide connection to the powerhouse, improve biomechanics and maintain flow. Building-block exercise versions should uphold the goal of the exercise; preparatory exercises

can be used to lead a student toward readiness. For example, when teaching the Hundred, begin the fundamentals ISO Abs, head nods, neck curls with the feet down and knees bent; over successive lessons, progress to feet up on a [stability ball](#), knees bent to legs straight. Do the one leg hundred with one leg held up for half the reps and then the other. Continue progressing one step at a time. Use stretches where rest is needed. Think creatively, but test variations and building-block ideas on your own body so you know how they feel and what they offer in terms of supporting the movement.

- Remember to always ask permission to touch the student when guiding and stabilizing movements. Protect yourself with good body mechanics, and use props rather than muscle to provide support.
- Check in with students at the start of each session to make sure they were not overly sore or fatigued after the last workout. If so, adapt your lesson plan. Keep a dialogue going by asking questions like “Where are you feeling soreness?”

The Mat

The mat part of the Pilates session builds strength, awareness and can be done at home. Try working with these suggestions to make the mat work more enticing for your overweight students:

- Teach mat on a [Cadillac](#) so they can get on and off easily. Use the roll back bar to aid with seated rolling back and substitute the roll down for the roll up initially.
- Use wedges such as a Flexcushion (available through at the Peak Pilates online store) to support the body, improve alignment of the head and shoulders, facilitate better breathing, and aid the student in lifting their head. If you do not have a wedge, substitute a small

barrel and pillows.

- Sponge balls and power circles help to improve leg alignment, connect to centerline, deepen into the Powerhouse and develop inner-thigh strength.
- * Use a yoga strap or dynabands to support the weight of the legs in One Leg Circle and Corkscrew I. Use stability balls in exercises such as the Abdominal Series.
- Be creative. If you have a student who can't lie prone, use prone table top and have them do cat and cow in place of Swan I Neck Roll and oppositional lifts in place of swimming.

The Reformer

Set up the [reformer](#) by taking it out a gear initially to provide a bit more space for the supine exercises. If they are shorter, bring it back in for Short Box, Elephant and other non-supine exercises. Some ideas for working with larger bodies on the reformer include:

- Help students enter the reformer by teaching them to sit and lower themselves sideways as if going to bed. To exit the reformer, they can reverse this process, or you can assist them by taking their hands or by giving them a short-box pole and pulling on the pole.
- Don't be afraid to play with the order a bit at first to minimize movements on and off the reformer and up and down on the carriage. Help with spring changes as well to promote comfort, facilitate flow and build endurance. Start with footwork and end with running and pelvic lift.
- When in doubt, leave it out. If your student carries a lot of weight in the abdomen, don't worry about Stomach Massage Round. Start with Stomach Massage Hands Back using an arm extender if needed. As they progress, you can introduce Stomach Massage Round on the chair, which

will provide a bit of extra space compared to the reformer.

- Factor in when springs are providing assistance versus resistance, and teach students this important concept. For some exercises, such as the Frog and Elephant, extra spring loads can actually provide greater support. For other exercises like Arm Reach and Pulls, consider their weight as a form of resistance. They may do better with regular springs or need hand weights instead of using the straps.
- Use [props](#) to provide extra support or create a better connection to the Powerhouse. Try placing a stability ball on the springs to provide support for students with more weight in the legs in exercises like Arm Reach and Pull and the Hundred, where legs are held up. Use a small ball between the legs on short box to improve centerline or add the short box behind the back for Stomach Massage Hands Back to give some support. Use the short-box pole across the pelvis in supine exercises such as footwork to support the arms. Tell students the pole will help them work with a level pelvis.
- Add extra reps to build stamina. For instance, in running, go out for a walk, come in for a stretch, go out for a jog, come in for a stretch, and take it out for a run. Each “set” will provide a slight tempo increase without sacrificing form.
- Look for folds in clothing, and notice elevated areas that give away alignment faults. Look at the lengths of fingertips and the evenness of the feet to gauge what is going on in the Powerhouse. If you are unsure of spine positioning, ask your clients questions like “Can you feel your spine lengthening along the carriage?”
- Touch with permission and clear intention. Use steady pressure so it is clear on what the touch is teaching.
- Keep reformer work light and fun. Let students enjoy these movements and the feeling of freedom in their joints.

Individual Needs

Just as when working with any student, use Part C – Individual Needs to help the student understand and progress their Pilates. Initially, the [Cadillac](#) will be an important tool, teaching students to move the limbs from a stable center while lying supine. If your student carries a lot of weight in their buttocks and thighs, use the heavy leg springs. Learning to “drive the Cadillac” is usually an enjoyable part of the experience. Don’t feel like every lesson needs to be different because repetition brings results, and students like familiarity. Once students gain confidence and a bit of movement vocabulary, add in barrels and chairs as appropriate for ability and weight distribution.

Endings – Part D

Always end the session on a positive note, and assign homework to keep them progressing. Functionally translate the work at the end of each session by incorporating balance challenges, working on posture and gait.

Pilates can improve the lives of everyone, from fitness professionals to people just starting out, such as those who are overweight. Educate yourself with research, articles, [workshops](#) and experienced instructors to help you and most importantly, let your students be your best teachers.

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