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# THE HUNDRE

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## My "Worst" Nightmare Client

By Sherri Betz, PT  
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When a client comes into the Pilates studio needing extra sheets of paper to describe her/his problems, the poor Pilates teacher should beware! Seriously, a client came into our studio needing extra space on the intake sheet to write down problems, and brought a file folder full of medical records, x-ray results and physical therapy notes. She wanted to "try" Pilates.

We spent the first session going over her extensive medical and exercise history and got down to the assessment. As it turns out, she was unable (or unwilling) to rotate her right hip even one inch, was unable to bear weight on her hands and unable to tolerate bridging. Ok, I thought, so now what?

She has a condition called 'Environmental Illness/Multiple Chemical Sensitivity' [EI/MCS], the chronic illness of those whose immune system has been overwhelmed by the assaults of late-20th-century post-industrial era. I had to make sure that I didn't purchase a new computer (she is highly allergic to plastics used in them), make sure no one used perfumes or scented body lotions in the studio, avoid paint touch ups, cleaning chemicals and delay purchasing new therabands or physioballs. The question is, did I want to take this on? Well, I tend to love challenges. We started with breathing....I thought, well, that could never hurt anyone....Wrong! She said, 'As long as we don't have to deal with breathing, I am willing to try Pilates'. So we started with footwork on the reformer. Thank goodness for light springs and variations in foot positions. We then tried arm arcs with one spring...so far so good ... as long as we kept her back in a neutral position without arching. Next we moved to 'feet in the straps' - oops - that provoked the sciatica. We started with very small movements with light resistance or even assistance and checked in often for her pain triggers, and eventually she began to get stronger and more confident. We tried the soft air-filled massage ball instead of the ladder barrel or baby arc to improve her thoracic extension and she loved it! She calls me an "evil genius" and is so addicted to that ball that she will just about do any exercise that involves it. I now look forward to her session every week because she is one of those clients who has taught me so much. (She is a writer, and I learn a new word every week that I have to look up in the dictionary!). We continue to progress slowly but she still hasn't let me even mention breathing! Her attorney even says that she is the only person who can talk for long stretches of time without breathing. Wow! If an attorney notices lack of breathing, it must be worse than I thought. So each week I keep hoping that she will conspire (literally means to breathe together) with me to learn to breathe....

*Here is her side of the story.....*

*My Life in Pilates, by Paulina Borsook*

I was led to therapeutic Pilates out of desperation. Anything other than lying flat in bed caused pain. At age 50 I could see that that I was headed for a wheelchair by age 55 if I didn't do 'something'. But what? Yoga increased my misery (and I hated it, besides). When I tried rehab aerobics offered by the local hospital, I found to my horror the hokey-pokey provoked my sciatica. There were people in that group 20 years older than me and newly recovered from surgery who unlike me did not move like the tin man from "The Wizard of Oz". I felt metal-clad (or maybe made of wood?). Everything creaked and hurt. Imagine a water buffalo lumbering around in pain in her wallow.

With Pilates, I began to let go of my fear of movement. I felt at times like a toddler learning to walk, (hell, like a toddler learning how to have ANY control over her limbs), as neuromuscular education took over my life. Ah, so that's how you lift something. That's how you reach for something. It was as if I had skipped an important step in my life as a corporeal being, and now was getting a last chance to take a remedial course in how to live in a body. Lifelong oppressively frightful posture, pigeon-toedness that had ceased being cute past the age of four --- these began to change not because they were on the agenda to do so, but because Pilates was gently re-educating my carcass how to get less in its own way and function more happily in its own best interest.

After about a year of Pilates, I began to notice how other people moved, too --- not from an aesthetic perspective ("gee, that guy has a sexy walk!") but from a biomechanical perspective ("gee, that dancer looks so strong in her core, isn't it great to see how she is able to leap out from it?").

Not only did my fear of movement begin to abate, but I began to regain confidence in my ability to navigate in the world. If I were in a situation where I had to do some lifting or carrying beyond the lightweight, I was fairly certain I would be able to do so in a safe way (slowly, carefully, attempting the movement thoughtfully). And if I did tweak my back or annoy my knees, I began to trust that the pain would be temporary and mutable. I had begun to learn the stretches and releases that would go towards undoing the mess my soft tissues had gotten themselves into. Facing the ordinary challenges of living, going out into the world without a retinue of servants to handle, carry, and move things --- well, I was so glad to be able to return to the world of the 'mostly-abled', as opposed to the world of the 'involuntarily princessy', a world I never had never actually wanted to enter.

Then, there were the unexpected benefits. Driving got easier, because of the greater range of motion in my neck, a boost for parking and changing lanes. Fine dining in polite company became less socially fraught, because of the greater range of motion in my shoulders. I hadn't realized that with time I had been finding using a knife and fork with finesse more and more difficult. My decades-old chronic repetitive stress injury began to cause far less pain (and the circulation improved in my hands) because my upper body took on more of the work my poor paws had been being forced to do. My migraines lessened in frequency and intensity, because there was less chronic spasticity in my neck and shoulders.

Muscle tone I thought I had lost just as result of ageing --- turned out to be happy to return. While I still totter and lumber, and no one would mistake me for graceful or agile, and I still live with pain, there is now, more often than not, a spring in my step.

And then there are the middle-aged woman secret vanities. The waistline returned (no more looking like a spayed dog!). The morbid fear of wearing shorts disappeared, should the need arise!

So yes, I am yet another fanatical convert to Pilates. It didn't so much change my life as return me to a life I had thought I had mostly lost for good.

***Paulina Borsook is a writer living in Northern California.***