

Pilates for every body



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Zosha is an international instructor trainer and convention presenter. She is involved in developing instructors and talent in freestyle group exercise, and is the key program developer and lecturer for the Network Pilates courses. Her goal is to motivate and inject her energy into others, and to bring about wellness and entertainment to people's lives. Zosha is also the co-host of Pilates TV on Foxtel's Lifestyle Channel.

Even though as Pilates instructors we are taught to modify movements to suit different levels, teaching regulars and brand new participants always poses a unique challenge.

Regular members who have been participating for many years tend to understand their bodies and are often seeking ongoing challenges. This is vastly different from the participant who is brand new and, therefore, requires an introduction to what Pilates is all about and how they can gain greater body awareness.

Often the newcomers are given a watered down version of the principles as the class is taken through the exercises; we tend to adopt a 'you'll get the hang of it' type attitude. Yet, what often results is that the new participants miss out on the explanation of the fundamentals behind the movements as well as the benefits.

The first class can be far from what they imagined, having been bombarded with terms such as 'neutral' and 'alignment' and concepts such as 'correct breathing' and 'centring', and they may walk away feeling confused and disappointed because they don't physically feel like anything happened for them. Unfortunately, in a fitness setting, if participants haven't got the gist of what Pilates is about in their first session, they will often not return.

The first session for a Pilates studio member is normally a one-on-one session that includes a posture assessment as well as instruction on basic principles and what exercises are appropriate for their posture. From here, they either attend a course of classes or they receive another one-on-one session before they attend a group class. The benefit of this system is that it allows the participant to actually grasp the concepts and postures, helping them to then better understand how to effectively work in a small group setting. Additionally, this induction is particularly important for those who suffer from pain or who are recovering from an injury.

So how can we implement this kind of detail in our clubs and group fitness environment?



A one-on-one induction is obviously the best option, because if participants have specific debilitating injuries, being in a group environment may often pose a considerable risk of exacerbating the condition. These participants *need* to have a one-on-one session with a Pilates instructor to get them to a point where they can attend a group class.

For the participant who has a relatively healthy spine and is a newcomer, it is imperative that clubs and instructors offer an essential course, or have a technique class, on the timetable. This allows people to be on the same page as regular participants, and have an understanding of terminology as well as concepts and how to apply them to their own bodies. It should be part of the club, or instructor, policy that all members attend the essential course, or technique class before attending a regular class.



An essential course could be anything from 5 to 10 weeks where people are booked in and required to attend each week. After this course they are then able to participate in drop-in classes over the timetable. This is perfect for instructors who already run courses at a club or space. People will be paying for a course anyway, so it is easy to put them through a fundamental course first.

The benefits of consecutive classes are that the classes are cumulative. Each week, something new is layered and participants are able to learn about posture and Pilates principles. In an essential course, participants are in the *cognitive* stages of learning. This is the *phase* where the brain analyses and interprets a new motor pattern. The brain then directs the activity, ensuring a correct starting position, movement phase and finishing position. Usually this stage of learning has a high error rate, and requires feedback and correction from an instructor. Hence, an essential course is a perfect learning environment as all participants will be at the same stage and there is no pressure to provide different levels for participants. Once people start to learn, and remember new movement patterns, they then progress to the associative stage. In the *associative phase*, the learner has started to get a 'feel' for the movement. There will be less errors and the participant can sometimes identify and correct their own mistakes.

Providing an essential course is an excellent solution to progressing people and maintaining the integrity of the method. However, some instructors in certain areas may not have the numbers to provide a separate course for beginners, and some clubs may not have any space on the timetable for an 8 week course. This is where a technique class could be an excellent option. To ensure participants can attend, the technique class should be placed once or twice a week on a timetable, and participants encouraged to attend at least four sessions to understand the principles and how to apply them to their body. The goal of the technique class is to teach the essentials required for participants to be able to attend a regular group Pilates class on the timetable. The content would be the same as the essential course; however, one wouldn't have the luxury of consecutive sessions. This Pilates technique class could also be extended to people who train in the gym or do other classes, to understand more about posture and how to get the best from their bodies.

Pilates makes you more effective at movement and daily life, so why not create a class that not only sells group and one-on-one Pilates, but also brings awareness to people training in the gym that may not realize they can apply the principles to everything they do?

Many clubs are realizing that members need a little more information before they attend a group Pilates class and have placed these technique classes on the timetable with much success.

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So how should these technique classes be structured?

The goal of the class is to provide the participant with enough information to be able to attend a group Pilate's class, and learn enough about basic posture principles to apply them in class or training.

Basic components required:

- Explain breathing and its benefits. Teach effective breathing patterns and how to incorporate them in daily life and exercise.
- Explain neutral alignment.
- Teach participants about centring and contracting deep corset muscles.
- Go through basic balance, stability and mobility exercises to reiterate posture types.
- Teach participants to have an awareness of their basic posture type and understand what they should focus on, be it mobility for certain areas and/or strength and stability for certain areas.

Obviously there are a lot of principles to cover in one class! So the focus in the class is not so much a workout but rather education through simple movements. Instructors should cover the basics without being too technical. Using effective imagery and simplistic teaching methods can help participants remember the essentials and progress to the next learning stage. When teaching principles, such as breathing, use a number of different examples so that participants have repetition in the learning. For example, breathing could be taught standing, sitting and in supine, and with aids such as a band or towel.

Many participants have difficulty understanding neutral spine and neutral pelvis. When teaching neutral pelvis, avoid using technical terms, such as ASIS (anterior superior iliac spine) and be a little more general. Without being condescending in your teaching, explain what you mean by hip and pubic bones, or show and explain body parts in such a way that will help participants commit it to memory. Put yourself into the shoes of a brand new participant that has never heard any anatomy terms, or who has done very little exercise. Everything will be new, and if we flood participants with too many concepts, they will be more confused than enlightened! The goal of the technique class is to introduce participants to Pilates and their posture. Once participants have a

sense of what Pilates is about then they will be ready to practise and feel the connection and awareness. They may not have mastered the stability and control, but they will have an understanding of what they are attempting to achieve and why.

As group fitness instructors and trainers, many of us have taken a little time, if not a long time, to grasp what Pilates is about. It is only saturation and layered learning that has enabled the light bulb to go off and for us to be Pilates and posture converts! Let's take that time to teach our new participants and provide classes and formats that embrace progression so we maintain the integrity of the Pilates method and help people achieve results. ♦



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