

Many of our Moving On instructors are trained as Pilates instructors as well as being Somatic Movement Educators and Dance Educators. This article speaks to how Pilates principles interface with the continuum of healthy exercise for breast cancer patients. Learn more about the importance of aerobic exercise as well at www.Movement4Life.com *Dr. Martha Eddy, CMA, RSMT*

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BREAST CANCER AND YOUR CLIENTS: USING PILATES' PRINCIPLES FOR HEALING

By Alison Stevens, MA, PT © 2009

Breast cancer has become so ubiquitous that you are extremely likely to have at least one client diagnosed during the time they are working with you. Pilates has a great deal to offer, both during initial treatment, and through the entire rehabilitation period.

It is important to remember that Pilates is a mind-body discipline, and not only a series of exercises. You can support your client and enhance her life more than just physically by using some of Joseph Pilates' original principles as a guide that can help both of you focus on the work ahead.

Joseph Pilates developed his original principles after studying yoga and martial arts and through exposure to many of Germany's emergent modern dancers in the early 20th century. He surrounded himself with people who believed that movement could be a transformative, as well as an artistic experience. Although he is primarily remembered for development of the physical exercise system that bears his name, the principles he developed show that he was concerned with the development of the entire person.

The original principles developed by Joseph Pilates are: Mental Conditioning, Physical Conditioning and Balance and Harmony. As part of Balance and Harmony he also included:

Ease and Economy of Movement

Concentration

Centering

Control

Precision

Flowing Movement and Breathing.

We can apply these principles to more than just the physical exercises by thoroughly evaluating your client's needs during her cancer experience. By using the principles as a guide, we can develop a comprehensive program that provides a deep level of support that goes beyond physical exercise.

For purposes of this article, the author will refer to the client as she and her, but it is important to understand that men can also get breast cancer, and that the same concepts can and should also be applied when working with men. Additionally, these concepts may be applied to work with any client with cancer – they are not specific to breast cancer.

Concentration: Point of Diagnosis

The point at which someone is diagnosed with breast cancer is a life changing moment, and one for which no one is prepared. It will affect every aspect of your client's life – from financial to relationships and family life, with the greatest impact being on her physical and emotional well being. Concentration comes in the form of focus on her immediate needs each session. At this point, it is important to abandon **YOUR** plan and your ideas of how the session should progress, and really tune into the person in front of you.

As an instructor, you share with your client a great deal of physical intimacy. As a result, she may feel more comfortable talking with you about her diagnosis and tests than she is with many others, including family and close friends. First and primarily, ask if there is anything you can do to help. It may be that your most important contribution at this point is to be there to listen to her story.

Ask her if she has someone to go with her to the doctor, and if not, suggest she take a tape recorder. She has to process so much information that having someone take notes for later reference is very important. (Unless you are very close friends, it is not appropriate to suggest you go with her, unless she asks you to. Be aware of appropriate client/instructor boundaries in this situation.) If you have accurate and up to date information about doctors or treatment, ask if she would like it; do not impose your ideas or judgment about what treatment she should pursue, or which doctors she should see. Give names and phone numbers and offer the information in written form if you have it.

Some women prefer not to discuss their diagnosis. Ask if you can help, and leave it at that. Keep checking in over time, but pay special attention to body cues, posture and movement that may give you important information about how your client is feeling.

From a movement perspective, if your client is feeling well, try to continue to perform a normal workout. It may be helpful to continue to work out as you usually do. It may help her to concentrate on something other than her diagnosis, even for a short time.

Centering

During initial diagnosis, centering is extremely important for both you and your client. Her world is already frantic, so she needs a space where she can focus on her body in a positive way. You can contribute to this by checking into your own breathing, your own movement and how you are touching your client. The more centered and grounded you are, the more you will be able to communicate this to your client. Try to keep your space quiet and calm; turn down loud music, and if working in a studio with other clients, try to minimize intrusive elements. Make your area as intimate and private as you possibly can.

During this time, concentrate on movement that centers and grounds your client. Exercises that are familiar, simple and focus on the core will help her remain connected to her body. Pay special attention to foot work and help her anchor to the earth.

Control: Having and Making Choices

Control is a big issue in pilates, although usually we apply the concept to the body. If we look at the larger issue of control over one's life you can help with that as well.

Of primary importance is your ability to keep a confidence. You may have a close relationship with this client, know other people in her circle, or be aware that she works with other instructors in the studio. Nonetheless, you MUST a) assume that what she is telling you is confidential, and b) ask her for permission to tell anyone else about what is going on with her. This is a crucial point. Your client has just been thrown into a world where she has very little control over anything. You can help her maintain control by respecting her right to privacy. No matter who you think would want to know, or how well intentioned your desire to create a network of support for her, you must let her lead the way by asking if it's ok to talk to others.

Over the course of treatment let your client lead the direction of your sessions. This also contributes to a sense of control over her body. Some clients, especially if they have been coming for a while will be able to tell you what they want to do. Use your intuition with everyone, and pay attention – don't run through a routine at your regular speed. Modify and adapt your program so that your client feels she has accomplished something, but without becoming exhausted or experiencing increasing discomfort.

Flowing Movement and Breathing: Treatment

Treatment for breast cancer may involve surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Depending on the type, and the stage of her cancer, your client may undergo some or all of these treatments, sometimes simultaneously. There is no reason for her to stop working with you as long as you are aware of any contraindications and she has clearance from her doctor. You should be aware of the side effects chemotherapy and radiation can cause, as well as post surgical movement restrictions before working out.

Chemotherapy's effects are systemic and toxic. This means that the entire body is being affected by the drug. Physically, your client may experience fatigue, so modify the intensity of the workout appropriately. She may experience low level nausea, or have digestive sensitivity that might make prone or supine lying uncomfortable. Modify your environment with pillows, bolsters or other forms of support, and vary positioning during the session often. Blood pressure issues are also common, so watch for signs of

dizziness as she changes position, and spot her while she gets on and off equipment and during standing activities. Depending on the type of chemotherapy, she may also be experiencing peripheral neuropathy in her hands and feet. They may feel numb or tingly, and she may have some skin break down so pay special attention to appropriate padding on straps and bars.

Although radiation is described as a local treatment method, it can have far reaching effects throughout the body. Radiation may cause skin burns, sensitivity and tenderness. Watch for straps and springs as they rub across skin. Pay attention to how and where your hands contact your client, and how much pressure you exert on her body. She may be hot or cold as well.

Clients for whom radiation is required often respond well to stretching and a focus on flexibility. Make sure that she is medically cleared before stretching through the radiated area, and that you do not over stretch any one particular area. Start slow and see how your client responds.

In designing a program during this period, emphasize breathing and movements that gently mobilize the rib cage. Encourage proper initiation and make sure that your student sequences fully through the ribs and thoracic spine. Fatigue remains an issue with radiation, so modify the workout – use less spring resistance, perform fewer repetitions, and continually monitor your client. Watch for signs of labored breathing, flushing of her skin, or other indications that she has met her exertion limit. Take frequent rests and encourage her to drink water.

Surgery may consist of a lumpectomy – where only a portion of the breast is removed, or a mastectomy, where the whole breast is removed. Your client may also undergo reconstruction, and it is very important to know what kind of reconstruction she is having performed as you plan your sessions. There are specific exercise protocols that must be followed regarding reconstruction, so make sure you are in contact with her physical therapist or doctor, and that you understand any contraindications. Remember also that some clients may not know all the limitations and restrictions they are under, or feel that they are able to push themselves more than is appropriate, so make sure you are aware of what they should or should not do in your session. Regardless of the procedure, encourage a return to movement as soon as possible. As soon as she has been medically cleared, begin to work on alignment and posture. Breathing is vitally important, and is often restricted after surgery. Minimize the possibility of frozen shoulder syndrome by maintaining rib and trunk mobility, scapular stabilization, and shoulder range of motion.

In your sessions focus also on how your client is performing the movement. Is the speed appropriate? How about the intensity? Is she using too much force? Try to develop movement sequences that flow from one exercise to the next with smooth and easy transitions, and that keep her moving and breathing for as long a period as possible without fatigue.

Mental Conditioning – Adapting to and Accepting Change

Your client will come through the process of cancer treatment a completely changed person. She will be dealing with issues of changes in her physicality possibly through

surgery, or physiological changes due to drugs or induced menopause. Her experience may lead her to make changes in her home or work life. Some see the process of cancer recovery as an opportunity to transform their lives and move into completely new directions. Others may have additional complications or have a diagnosis of metastases – where the cancer has spread to other organs. This will require continued medical treatment and a further adaptation of her program.

Mental conditioning is the ability to focus on the activity at hand, and to improve concentration through increasing repetitions and complexity. Mental conditioning also includes the ability to multi-task, to hold onto breathing patterns and alignment while increasing the complexity of the movement being performed. After your client has completed her treatment, you can begin to support these changes in her by providing an atmosphere where she can focus on her body in a positive way. Slowly increase repetitions, intensity and exercise difficulty in a way that allows her see the progress she is making, and helps her connect to the different person that she is becoming.

Balance and Harmony - Concluding Points

These are only a few of the ways that you can use Joseph Pilates' original principles to guide your client through her process. If we keep in mind the concepts of his work, rather than only focusing on the exercises, we can provide a fuller and richer experience for someone who is going through a life altering experience. As an instructor, it is important to understand that working conceptually is not a linear process. Continually revisit the principles, and see how and where you can apply them. Working this way reminds us to check in with our clients on multiple levels, and to keep their needs in the forefront of the session. Ultimately, it becomes a more fulfilling and enriching process for you, the instructor as well.