

PRINCIPALLY SPEAKING

Pilates Is the Best Form of Exercise For EDS

By Sabrina Vaz

The six principles which have become cardinal to the work which Joseph Pilates called “Contrology” were never defined by Mr. Pilates. In fact, in 1934 he wrote *Your Health* and in 1945 he wrote *Return to Life*; without any acknowledgement of six principles. However, Pilates instructors all over the world mention these useful concepts. So where did they come from? Thirteen years after Joe’s passing two Pilates Pro’s, Gail Eisen and Philip Freidman published *The Pilates Method of Physical and Mental Conditioning*. Centering, Concentration, Control, Precision, Breathing and Flow were born and still today structure our understanding of what we now refer to as Classical Pilates.

These principles outlined by Eisen and Freidman define a very systematic method that benefits the symptom free healthy body as well as the body which may suffer from connective tissue disorders such as Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome. Cervical instability, pelvic floor dysfunction, musculoskeletal pain, scoliosis, kyphosis, and poor muscle tone are just a few of the conditions that can result in the Hyper Mobile body. Consequently, leaving people with this diagnosis without hope of strengthening and stabilizing their body in a safe pain free manner unless they find Pilates. The Pilates principles are proof of the security in Joe’s method of conditioning. As a matter of fact, in Mr. Pilates studio in Manhattan he worked with countless contortionists, dancers and side show performers who may very well have had EDS. Because of his work many hypermobile bodies were strengthened and stabilized helping to reduce pain associated with over flexible muscles, joints, and tendons. Many people state his work is only for the healthy strong body, but they don’t realize that is not the population that was frequenting 939 8th Avenue in New York. It was the injured ballerina, the hypermobile circus performer with chronic pain and the businessman that could not sit at his desk because of the spasms in his back and neck. Although he did not formally mention these principles, they were the core of his life’s work which is why they live on today.

Addressing first, centering which predominately has to do with alignment and strengthening the center of the body or what Mr. Pilates called “the Powerhouse.” When we understand how to stand in a stable position without shifting weight and sit upright with the ability to stabilize our pelvis, we have better spinal health which aligns throughout the body. We cannot achieve this when we have no core strength. In the EDS patient this is crucial and the first step to feeling better. However, centering is not simply better physical balance but emotional balance as well.

Emotional and mental needs always must be addressed not just in Hypermobile bodies but everybody. Focusing the mind aids in short and long-term memory, increased clarity and overall feelings of wellness which is why concentration is a crucial principal of the method. Many people with Ehlers Danlos Syndrome deal with some sense of attention deficit and the focus in Pilates quiets the mind and puts it into the body by bringing awareness to the body during exercise creating a better feeling of physical and emotional health.

There is a lot we still do not understand about EDS but health care providers dealing with this Zebra disease recognize the need for patients to gain better control over their muscles, joints, and tendons. To

maintain independence the patient must sometimes overcome coordination challenges, increase proper gait mechanics, and address hyperactivity in the pelvis and other areas. The control that Joe Pilates taught is the way we can use our mind to achieve the movements our body makes consequently strengthening small muscle groups to stabilizing large sections of the body such as the shoulder girdle, the lumbar spine, the ankle, and feet to name a few.

Precision of movement dictates correct placement when exercising which is then taken to all activities. Every exercise has a purpose. Correct placement of the cervical when at the computer is achieved after learning how to strengthen the neck in “Roll Back.” Proper placement of the wrist when grabbing something becomes easier after understanding to keep a long strong wrist during the upper body hand weight series. A strong ankle which is over a foot that is balanced on the three points of contact to prevent supination or pronation is easier to maintain when the “Pilates Stance” is practiced regularly. These are merely a few examples of the magic of precise movement which when used with the other principals such as control will also increase balance by cultivating a better relationship to the ground. It is clear how all of this improves proprioception, the neurodevelopmental profile and overall better feeling of security and safety from dislocation, subluxation and in some situations falling.

Breath patterns and exercises designed specifically to get the breath to flow through the body were designed by Mr. Pilates such as The Hundred. We know breathing exercises can help decrease pain levels, coordinating the breath with movement can be even more powerful. Many EDS patients experience numbness, burning and stabbing pain associated with Peripheral Neuropathy. Breathing combined with exercise patterns increases oxygen and can help to calm the nervous system.

Chronic fatigue can be debilitating for anyone but combine that with several of the other symptoms I have mentioned common with EDS, and it is unbearable. Flow in movement can invigorate the body and the spirit creating a rhythm that the client chooses with the tempo of their own breath once the movement is learned and mastered.

Pilates is not a quick fix. Joe said, “In ten sessions you will feel a difference”, this is true. He also said, “In twenty sessions you will see a difference.” You will see a difference in your strength and stability. It is a practice which should be done under the supervision of a qualified Classical Pilates practitioner. Someone who understands EDS and how to modify the work for the individual by embodying these adapted principals. Mr. Pilates also stated that “In thirty sessions you will be different.” Unfortunately the method is not a cure, although with safe simple homework performed daily and designed specifically for each patient’s needs, the hyper mobile body will experience improvement in stability and strength, physically and mentally.