Recovering from Emotional Trauma with Pilates

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Abstract

In this paper, Clara a 20 year old female assault victim was asked to undergo a 30 week Pilates BASI Block System Program. Clara had weak back extensors, scapular stabilization, abdominals and hamstrings along with tight pectorals. The program she underwent targeted strengthening the weak muscles and stretching the tight muscles. Additionally, Clara’s main purpose for participating in the program was to reduce her anxiety and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms. Through controlled breathing and focusing on reducing tension in specific body parts, Clara worked on reducing anxious emotions. The results from the program showed that Clara gained strength in the targeted muscles as well as learned methods of reducing anxiety with the help of the exercises. She felt an inner and physical strength that had been lacking since the assault.
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The following program has been designed for Clara Spencer. Clara is a 20-year-old woman who suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after being assaulted in her teens. Since her assault, Clara has adapted to life without seeking psychological or physical therapy. Recently, she agreed to undergo this 30 week Pilates program, which was accompanied by psychotherapeutic counseling. Upon first assessment of Clara’s physical fitness, it became apparent that Clara had not only a defeated demeanor, but her posture reflected weak upper back extensors, tight pectorals and little scapular stabilization/strength. Clara’s posture seemed to reflect her inner anxiety and stress from the assault. According to the Comprehensive Study Guide, psychological factors can influence a range of components from posture to how a movement is executed (BASI). As she had psychologically, her posture indicated her physical withdrawal from society. She had kept her experience internal, which in turn manifested itself physically as her body drew inward containing her internal struggle.

The multi-equipment program was designed to help Clara strengthen her back extensor muscles, loosen her pectorals and increase her scapular strength and stability, along with strengthening abdominal stabilizers. This would improve her posture by bringing her thoracic spine from being overly flexed back into alignment.

In addition to the exercises improving Clara’s posture and fitness, the programs intended goal was to help Clara cope with her stress and recover from the trauma of her assault. Research indicates, “the impact of trauma such as physical violence, childhood
sexual abuse, or rape is extensive, and can influence long-term physical and psychological health of survivors (Dunleavy et. al 2012).

Additionally, in a case study on a client with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), researchers found that through physical therapy, psychotherapy, and Pilates exercises the patient made improvements in PTSD symptoms over time. For this patient, Pilates exercises were used during both the individual treatment and in the back care class to improve her core stability and alignment. The patient reported that there were additional benefits to this approach, including improving her body awareness and “connection” to her body and, in turn, helping to control her PTSD symptoms (Dunleavy et al. 2012).

In another study that tested the efficacy of body-oriented therapy compared to massage therapy, results found that body-oriented therapy increased psychological well-being (decreased PTSD, dissociation and psychological distress), increased physical well-being, and increased body connection among women in psychotherapeutic recovery from childhood sexual abuse (Price et. al 2012). Body-oriented therapy incorporates similar principles as Pilates. Such principles included exhalation to facilitate movement of breath through the body, relaxation of tension areas in the body, and bringing into focus specific areas of the body (Price et. al 2012). The Block System program designed for Clara was based off knowing this research and using Pilates to incorporate these principles in order to aid her trauma recovery.
Clara had basic knowledge or practice with Pilates so the program had to start from a fundamental level. With her consistent work, Clara progressed well and reached an intermediate level of Pilates after about fifteen weekly sessions. These were the back muscles targeted in the program specifically the Latissimus dorsi and trapezius.

The abdominal muscles were objectives of the program as well so that Clara could develop important stabilizing muscles: as seen below.
The initial ten sessions consisted of fundamental level work with Clara. These sessions were important for having her learn how to start being aware of her body, isolating different muscle groups, and focusing on controlled breathing. The warm up consisted of the Pelvic Curl, which engaged the hamstrings and abdominals as well as introduced spinal articulation. Spine Twist Supine, Chest Lift (with use of the Step Barrel in order to extend the Thoracic spine), Chest Lift with Rotation and Leg Changes were also part of the warm up.

Clara learned her footwork on the Wunda Chair. Since the trunk stabilizers are engaged throughout the series, the Wunda chair provides a good opportunity to work on her posture as she performs her footwork. The back extensors are working in synch with the abdominals to hold her upright, both of which needed strengthening.

For her abdominal work, Clara started with the Hundred Prep then after several sessions worked on the Hundred. The isometric contraction exercise provided Clara to focus on her controlled repetitive breathing while bringing her focus inward as was manifested as her gaze was directed towards her navel. This controlled breathing allowed her an exercise to turn to when she felt anxious. Along with the Hundred, Clara worked on the Overhead Stretch on the Step Barrel as a way of opening up her pectoral muscles and extending the thoracic spine. The Criss Cross on the Mat and Long Box series on the Reformer were introduced after her ten sessions when she had gained strength and knowledge of the exercises. The Short Box series included exercises that encouraged Clara to engage her abdominals and back extensors simultaneously as she
stabilized her trunk. Additionally, the Bottom lift with Roll up bar on the Cadillac was introduced over time so that Clara had to engage her latissmus dorsi while engaging her hamstrings and abdominals, all which help her strengthen her stabilizing muscles in order to adjust her posture.

Clara performed hip work on the Cadillac. She worked on the double and single leg series (frog, circles, walking/hip extension, bicycle) in order to strengthen her hamstrings and improve her hip dissociation while stabilizing her pelvis.

It took Clara longer than the average ten sessions to understand and gain enough strength to incorporate the spinal articulation. Once she gained more body awareness and strength, she worked on the Bottom Lift and Pelvic Curl on the Wunda chair along with Tower prep and Tower on the Cadillac. These exercises were chosen because of the engagement of the hamstrings throughout the spinal articulation.

Stretches such as the Standing and Kneeling lunge were helpful for Clara. To stretch and open up the shoulders/chest the Shoulder Stretch 2 on the Ladder Barrel was used. Also used, was the Shoulder Stretch Lying Side on the Step Barrel, which focuses on the latissimus dorsi and pectorals while targeting shoulder control, shoulder stretch, and a thoracic stretch. These stretches gave a physical metaphor of what emotionally she strived towards, opening up and releasing tension that the body was holding onto.

After roughly ten sessions working with Clara, Full Body Integration 1 Block was incorporated. She worked on Round back and Flat back in order to engage her
transverse abdominals as well as back extensors. These exercises were excellent for Clara because the objectives targeted her weaknesses: trunk stabilization, shoulder stabilization, hip extensor control/strength, and knee extensor control/strength. Up Stretch 1 and Elephant were also used along, which then progressed into Down Stretch and Up stretch 2.

For her Arm work, Clara started out with the Arm Supine Series on the Reformer. These exercises were chosen because of the latissimus dorsi work that they provide. Clara also worked on the Shoulder Push then progressed to Shoulder Push Single Arm and Rowing Front 1 and 2. The Arms Sitting series also was beneficial because of the rhomboid/pectoral agonist and antagonist work it provided. Additionally, Clara would work on Wunda chair Shrugs and Tricep Prone in order to engage the mid/upper trapezius and scapula strength and stabilization.

Full Body Integration II only was incorporated after the 28 session because Clara needed to continue to gain strength and body awareness. Clara worked on Long Back Stretch because of the scapular stabilization it requires along with hip extensor control. Both Front and Back Support on the Mat were imperative to learn and have control over before moving to the reformer. Then she attempted Balance Control Front and Balance Control Back Prep due to the scapular stabilization, latissimus dorsi, and lower trapezius work it focuses on. Clara reported feeling a better connection to her body and better control over her anxiety after the 20th session just as similar patients had during a case study who participated in Pilates during Physical therapy (Dunleavy et al. 2012).
Clara’s Leg work was comprised of Leg Press Standing and Hamstring Curl on the Wunda Chair, which she progressed to the intermediate level Backward Step Down exercise.

Her lateral flexion/rotation work started out with the Saw and Spine Twist on the Mat and then after several sessions could perform the Side Kneeling Stretch. She also worked on the Reformer doing the Mermaid and Side Over Box.

Lastly, her back extension started out with the Cat Stretch on the Mat so that she could learn to isolate her lumbar and thoracic spine. These exercises helped Clara focus on specific parts of her body at a time with controlled breathing, which proved to be a relaxing. She later used the Reformer to work on Breaststroke Prep, Breaststroke and Pulling Straps 1 and 2.

Along with the exercises, the Pilates studio itself can be a safe and psychologically beneficial environment for the client. Research from Dunleavy et al. 2012 showed that mirrors in the Pilates studio are helpful not just for viewing a client’s posture/positioning in Pilates form, but also give clients a way of viewing self and position of others in the room so they don’t feel trapped.

Other psychological benefits from Pilates are stated in the Comprehensive Teacher Training Course Study Guide. Such benefits include that the importance of setting goals, which allowed her to strive towards improvements. Lastly, creative cueing brought Clara back into the present moment so she could focus on her body while dealing with her flashbacks and anxiety.
Just like Pilates transform the body from the inside out, clients will find psychological healing from deep within. As the connective tissue, supporting and stabilization muscles are strengthened, clients can use their physical strength to help them cope with their psychological issues. Pilates taught Clara that for the first time in her assault she could feel she was in control of her own body. Her posture before Pilates was a reflection of her self-worth that she was not worthy of society and needed to close herself off from it. After the Pilates program, Clara could stabilize herself physically with the proper use of her back extensors and abdominals just as she could internally.
Bibliography

