The effects of the Pilates method in the healing process following extreme emotional distress

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SUMMARY

“Pilates develops the body uniformly, corrects wrong postures, restores physical vitality, invigorates the mind, and elevates the spirit” Joseph Pilates

There is an undeniable connection between our emotional well being and our physical health. The way our emotions transform our thoughts and these thoughts travel from our brain into different parts of our bodies is scientifically proven to affect our overall physical health. Just like it is true that our physical health, starting with posture, also reflects on our emotional state. Wouldn’t it make sense to acknowledge emotional imbalance just as we carefully analyze physical imbalance?

When a client is experiencing substantial emotional pain we must take a holistic approach into wellbeing and investigate as Pilates instructors the simple but effective ways within our professional scope in which we are able to help our clients not only feel cared for but obtain better results physically and emotionally after each session.
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ANATOMICAL ANALYSIS

The scientific piece

How does exercise change the chemicals in the brain and how does that affect our emotions?

Improved self-esteem is a key psychological benefit of regular physical activity. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain.

Endorphins also trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine. For example, the feeling that follows a run or workout is often described as "euphoric." That feeling, known as a "runner's high," can be accompanied by a positive and energizing outlook on life.

Endorphins act as analgesics, which means they diminish the perception of pain. They also act as sedatives. They are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The neuron receptors endorphins bind to are the same ones that bind some pain medicines. However, unlike with morphine, the activation of these receptors by the body's endorphins does not lead to addiction or dependence.

The brain, the endorphins and the invisible picture of emotional pain
Endorphins are inhibitory because they block pain signals from being released. They provide psychological and physical pain relief, pleasure, reward and good or loving feelings toward others.

Endorphins are released from the pituitary gland, found in the brain, located in the central nervous system, during exercise, orgasm and consumption of spicy food.
INTRODUCTION

I heard a teacher say once that we store emotional stress in different parts of our body, for example. I have researched this idea to find out that our brain is wired to flex our spine when we are emotionally distressed.

From utero, babies protect themselves in the fetal position and that is often the position we assume when we are looking for comfort or dealing with pain (either emotionally or physically) We lie down and curl naturally contracting our front body. It is the same position people assume if assaulted or in a shooting (Sadly we see this too often these days) People drop to the floor and protect themselves in the fetal position becoming as small as possible, lessening the target surface. This position is more or less a protective, comforting and familiar position engrained in our brains since before birth.

In the same way, someone feeling emotional pain is not usually seen standing with a long spine and an open chest. They are more likely looking down, caved in, internally rotated at the shoulders and flexed substantially in the thoracic spine, upper thoracic kyphosis, pelvis posteriorly tilted, tailbone pointing down and under like a dog with the tail between their legs.

While it’s true that the posture is this way because one is sad, it’s also true that one is sad because of sitting this way. This philosophy, known as embodied cognition, is the idea that the relationship between our mind and body runs both ways, meaning our mind influences the way our body reacts, but the form of our body also triggers our
mind. Emotions and thoughts affect our posture and energy levels; conversely, posture and energy affect our emotions and thoughts.

This is where Pilates can help brake the cycle.

"The brain has an area that reflects confidence, but once that area is triggered it doesn’t matter exactly how it’s triggered," says Richard Petty, professor of psychology at Ohio State University. "It can be difficult to distinguish real confidence from confidence that comes from proper posture … these things go both ways just like happiness leads to smiling, but also smiling leads to happiness."

So when we say we are looking to improve our mood by exercising we literally mean we are looking to actually change our hormones—increased levels of testosterone and decreased levels of cortisol, or the stress hormone, in the brain by reaching a level of exercise that produce more happy hormones.

This is the body’s most natural method for healing itself from emotional imbalance and it is within our scope to help people get the benefits.
CASE STUDY

The biggest break up

Because of the personal nature of this case, the person who I have selected for my case study would like to remain anonymous. For this paper’s purpose I will refer to my client as Vicky. 54 years old.

POSTURAL ANALYSIS:

Pelvis posteriorly tilted, shoulders internally rotated, kyphosis.

PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS: Had a left knee arthroscopic surgery for meniscus tear five years ago. Can’t kneel, limited mobility but can flex the knee 100-110 degrees. Needs strengthening around the knee. I am however focusing on the emotional aspect of this client for this research while keeping her safety and physical progress in mind.

CLIENT’S BACKGROUND

Vicky is in her mid fifties and is a hard working publicist for many musicians and bands. She is the mother of two teenagers and is in the middle of an ugly separation and divorce from her husband of 20 years due to his alcoholism and violent verbal outbreaks that resulted in one event of physical domestic abuse that required police involvement and an immediate change to their living arrangements. When I first saw Vicky, it had been maybe 3 weeks since this dramatic event. She is a strong woman that never loses her sense of humour and was holding it together for her children. She was desperate to work out. She knows about the positive effects of exercise to lessen stress.
INDIVIDUAL PROGRAM-BLOCK SYSTEM

From a physical perspective I focused on length, back extension, external rotation of the shoulder, and isometric abdominal exercises where there is less trunk flexion to aid with her posture.

**Warm up** Roll down. On the mat: pelvic curl, spine twist supine, chest lift and with rotation- not too many reps as i prefer to add both leg lifts and leg changes.

**Foot work** in the reformer where hip flexion is at a lesser angle than Cadillac.
Parallel heels, parallel toes, V Position toes, Open V heel, Open V toes, calf raises, Prances, Prehensile, single leg heel, single leg toes. All of these exercises are wonderful for strengthening the muscles around knee.

**Ab work** in reformer Flat back, Tilt, Twist, *Climb a tree* (gives that really opening feeling int he chest!!) from short Box group

**Hip work** single leg supine in Cadillac. Chose this one because it allows client to focus on moving one leg at a time, and gives me more time to cue breath which is incredibly important to someone dealing with high emotional stress.

**Spinal articulation** using the cadillac as a mat for flow, Spine Stretch from Mat as it allows me to work slowly and give tactile cues to spinal articulation as it moves into neutral spine. Im most interested on the shoulder stability and spinal length.

**Stretches** Shoulder stretch in Cadillac as it helps find full range of motion in the shoulder girdle and aids in finding the muscles that externally rotate and stabilize the shoulders.
Then Hamstring stretch on the Ladder Barrel. In observing her posteriorly tilted pelvis I expected hamstrings to be tight and I emphasized the hand/shoulder position in this stretch as it opens the chest.

**Full body integration** in reformer Up stretch 1 and Long Stretch. Would have liked down stretch for back extension but kneeling not an option. Long stretch has that open chest feeling at the forward stage.

**Arms** in reformer arms supine series, letting her back muscles have a little release.

**Full body integration Advanced** Skipped initially. When ready add balance control front

**Legs** Jumping series to get her some cardio is key to get the endorphins released. I left extra time to do 2 or 3 sets.

**Side flexion and rotation** in the Wunda chair Side Stretch or i would stay in reformer for Mermaid.

**Back extension** swam basic in Wunda chair, or if i stayed in reformer Breast stroke prep, when ready hanging back in Cadillac.

Finish with Roll down.
CONCLUSION-TEACHING STRATEGIES

"You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair".

~ Old Chinese Proverb

Beyond woking on alignment, strength and facilitating the release of endorphins, there is much to be done as an instructor in the subtle but powerful ways we lead the class.

Keep it simple but not too simple.

Choosing exercises that do not involve several movements within the same breath cycle are best to fight feeling overwhelmed.

Compassionate cueing

Emphasizing positive cueing as opposed to asking a client “not to do something” is a general rule and when someone is in the midst of grief it is even more important to keep the language on the positive side. Making the client feel they are doing a great job and not being overly picky to the point the client feels she cant get it right, is advisable.

Sometimes we like to verbalize things we see in a clients body. Imbalances, asymmetries etc that can help the client become more aware of their body.

However, some of these things might not be appropriate to mention in sensitive times when confidence is low. A tactile cue might be more “tactful”

Focusing on breath

When cueing, keep referencing the breath.
Try to find as many ways as possible to encourage them to breath with their movement. If the client only hears inhale, exhale, a hundred times, after a while he/she will zone out and those words will mean nothing but an invitation to let the mind wonder (...into the stressful, traumatic events that they are dealing with...and that only leads to forgetting to breathe altogether.) Some ideas are: “Inhale/exhale, breath in/breath out, air goes in through the nose and out through the mouth, feel the ribs expands laterally as you inhale, feel the abdominals contract as you exhale”

**Music**

Music can be a very calming and therapeutic source. Although not used in traditional Pilates, and sometimes not appropriate if there are others in the room, if it helps a client that is in extreme stress, ask them if they would enjoy some sound.

**Communication**

It is often hardest for a person in grief to go through the motions of everyday life without verbally acknowledging the emotional state they are in, simply because it seems too huge to be ignored. Yet, it seems inappropriate to talk about such personal matters unless there is an invitation to do so.

People in grief are waiting for an opportunity to feel able to express what they are feeling. As a Pilates instructor, we are not counsellors or psychologist but a brief conversation and a little bit of compassion can go a long way in creating a much deeper connection with a client. When meeting with a private client we ask about any injuries they would like us to know about...consider that trauma and grief are like an injury in the heart. There are no x-rays unfortunately but the emotional pain can certainly have a negative impact in the immune system and therefore the overall health of an individual.
Asking- How is your mood today? How is your energy level? will make them feel like you care without having to go into too much detail. If they can just express in 2 sentences how they are feeling and we can just listen and accept without providing advice, a huge weight will lift off their shoulders…and that is good when you are doing teaser!

**Encourage client**

Remind them they are doing something good.

Regular exercise has been proven to:

Reduce stress, ward off anxiety and feelings of depression, boost self-esteem, improve sleep.

**Repetition**

Repetition is important after loss or change. Coming back to the already known. Creating familiar habits, it increases confidence and boosts self-esteem when someone knows what to do.

**Keep the challenge within reach**

A client that is not feeling in control of his/her life due to an extreme traumatic experience needs to feel a sense of security in achieving the goals in each exercise.

It is important to not set the goals too high and make the client feel as if he/she has failed. It is very important to consider the greater goal of Pilates in its holistic approach which is to feel good about oneself.
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