

special populations

Teaching obese clients, children and older people brings special challenges—but incredible rewards. **by Shari Berkowitz**

For the Pilates pro, even a “normal” client has many issues we need to deal with—chronic aches and pains, diseases, traumatic injuries. “Special-population” clients, by which here I mean obese, young and older clients (I’ll cover pre- and post-natal clients in the next



Working with obese clients can be a unique opportunity to foster a love of fitness and movement in someone new to exercise.

client, the first of which is simply getting on the equipment,” says Kerrie Ann Frey, Modern Pilates Training co-owner and senior instructor and certified personal trainer and weight management consultant in New Orleans. “The client may have difficulty squatting to stand or to sit, getting on a Reformer or getting down on the floor for matwork. Squatting puts pressure on their already compromised joints and vertebrae, so it’s important to ease him or her into whatever position you require.”

“The stability of the Cadillac is comfortable for an overweight client as is sitting upright on the Wunda Chair,” she continues. “Clinical Reformers (Reformers that are set higher off the floor, raised on legs like a Trapeze Table/Cadillac) work nicely as they are higher up and at times, wider than a standard Reformer.”

“Another challenge is body placement on the equipment,” Frey points out. “Overweight clients may be able fit their torsos on the carriage, but won’t be able to put their arms down long by the sides of the body.” Or, for instance, they may not fit between the handles of the High Chair.

When working with an obese client, assess all the apparatus before the session to evaluate if they will fit comfortably on it.

issue), require a completely different mind-set—and specialized knowledge—than other students. It is vital to know what is going on with their bodies and minds in order to create a personalized Pilates program that is a positive experience for them.

And, by reaching out to nontraditional clients, you will make your teaching experience much more fulfilling, personally, professionally and financially.

We talked to Pilates teachers and teacher trainers who work with these various groups for their tips on making the method a safe, beneficial and happy experience for everyone.

OVERWEIGHT AND OBESE CLIENTS

As this client’s Pilates teacher, you must be aware of the possible medical complications as well as other issues that obese clients may face when they walk into your studio.

The right equipment

“There are several physical challenges for the obese

Avoid compromising positions

Certain physical positions can be problematic, too. Frey points out that forward flexion of the spine can be a problem because, sometimes, there is too much mass. Even lying supine can be a problem because of blood pressure issues. You can use a series of pillows, a foam wedge created for pregnant women or very small barrel to keep the head elevated higher than the heart and to accommodate the back mass and find length in the neck.

“Another important consideration to keep in mind is that most obese clients new to Pilates, will not be able to get in touch with their core, particularly their transverses, for a long while,” Frey points out. “In fact, they may not be in touch with most of their body. It takes time for a mind/body connection to be made with someone who has lost touch with herself. You may be cuing to draw the navel in while doing a small round back on the Short Box, but she may have no idea what you’re talking about. Take time to open up the lines of communication so that she is comfortable telling you that she doesn’t understand what you are describing.”

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Be aware of ancillary, physical issues

As teachers, we must also deal with the ailments caused by obesity. "Often the client will have orthopedic problems (most often arthritis) from their weight such as knee, back, foot and/or hip pain," says Bonnie Sessions, senior faculty at BASI Pilates in Ventura, CA. "Most occur due to stress on the joints from poor posture and excessive weight. They may also have medical issues [such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease]. Know their medical history and get a doctor's release if any disease is present," Sessions emphasizes.

Since you know that heart disease is likely, make sure you have your CPR and AED certifications up to date and a functioning defibrillator onsite.

Stay mindful of confidence issues

Just entering a Pilates studio can require a triumph of the will for an inactive person who may be intimidated being around lots of super-fit bodies. "Poor body image, self-worth issues and comparing themselves to others" are major, mental impediments," says Sessions.

Frey agrees, "Instructors will need to assess how sensitive a client is, how nervous and how frustrated a client may be. Often depression accompanies obesity and that can manifest itself in poor self-esteem and lack of commitment to an exercise program."

Create a comfort zone

So what do we do about it? Well, we must treat our obese clients like any other client. Before his or her session, give a brief tour of the studio, make sure there is a comfortable place to fill out paperwork and choose apparatus and exercises that really fit him or her. Ask apprentices to occupy themselves elsewhere in the studio and not observe these first sessions.

In a group class setting, be attentive to their individual needs. Make sure you plan for modifications and try not to single this client out. As always, start by teaching a modified version of an exercise, then add more and more

challenging versions for those who can do them.

Remember, as a Pilates teacher, you're in a special position to help, not just with the exercises that you choose. "Emotionally, they are empowered by doing exercises that restore their confidence in daily living, such as better balance, ability to walk with comfort, greater endurance," Sessions says. "A sense of control returns to them which can carry over into other areas of their life. Plus, this is an opportunity to foster a love of fitness in a de-conditioned person."

For more information on obesity, you'll find a lot of information at weightwatchers.com, Frey's site, modernpilates.com and ideafit.com

A workshop on obesity can be helpful, too. Sessions presents workshops with BASI (check out basipilates.com.) Frey also presents workshops (go to modernpilates.com for more information).

YOUNG CLIENTS

Children are increasingly getting into Pilates, which is great news as strenuous, physical activity is becoming ever less prevalent in our children's lives. Kids' programs



Kids' classes can benefit both athletic and inactive children.

are being developed across the country, from initiatives such as The Pilates Method Alliance's Pilates in the Schools: Healthy Movement for Life to individual studios offering sessions and programs geared to children.

Pilates can improve our youngsters' "acuity, flexibility, balance, endurance, control and improve their self-esteem and posture," says Kim Carruthers, owner of Physical Perfection studio in Los Angeles and founder

It's especially important as children go through normal changes like growth spurts and puberty; Pilates can help them reconnect with their bodies and feel physically good about themselves.

and director of Pilates in The Hood, a program for children. "They learn that movement is important to acquire the optimum level of health."

It's especially important as children go through normal changes like growth spurts and puberty; Pilates can help them reconnect with their bodies and feel physically good

Using exercise balls and elastic bands can make kids' classes more enjoyable.



about themselves. Carruthers says that in dealing with obese children, in particular, "They must overcome the lack of confidence and motivation. Work to build their overall self esteem."

Start with assessment

Just like with any new client, learn about their medical history. Don't hesitate to ask the parent or guardian for doctor's clearance if there are any major health issues. (In any case, you'll need a signed permission slip from parents in order for their child to participate.)

Make sure the session is age appropriate

From three to six, children have short attention spans and limited coordination. From seven to nine, they are just learning command of their bodies and minds. From nine to twelve, there is better coordination and additional interest in things beyond "play." From 13 to 17, there is the possibility for greater concentration, mastery of movements and cognitive understanding.

So it's important your classes are age-appropriate. Very little ones must always do matwork on the floor rather

than up on the more dangerous (i.e. off the ground) apparatus like the Cadillac. And stay off of balance-oriented apparatus like the Wunda and High Chair.

Another consideration when working with children on the equipment is size. While an apparatus like the Reformer can be made longer, it can't be made shorter. Take that into account when choosing your exercises. For your client to be able to do Footwork, she must be able to have her shoulders firmly into the shoulder blocks when her feet are on the footbar.

Recall, too, that the weight of the carriage, relative to her light bodyweight, is a considerable challenge. Our bones don't ossify completely until our mid to late 20s, so opt for extra light springs.

Also watch out for moves where the springs can cause downward compression on the spine. This means avoiding any spring-loaded overhead exercise like Short Spine, Long Spine, Tower and Monkey (even though they are upright, they can be terribly compressive).

Consider short attention spans

For those under 10 years old, maybe 15 minutes is enough at first until they develop focus and can start to do a little bit more. However, pre-teen and teenagers can start with 30 and often times do a full 55 minutes if they already have a focused lifestyle like dancers and athletes do.

Evaluate each child's concentration individually

For instance, an exercise such as Going Up Front/Step Up on the High Chair might be fine for a disciplined 12-year-old ballet dancer, but for her unfocused classmate, it could be very dangerous.

Make it fun

Hopefully, Pilates is relatively fun for everyone, but with children, make extra room for laughter. Make your images a little sillier. "Creating a relaxed, serene and fun environment is very important," Carruthers says. "I enjoy adding music, exercise balls and elastic exercise bands. I also allow the students to demonstrate exercises that they have learned and mastered to develop their self-esteem and to help newer students feel comfortable."

How do you learn to teach children? Talk with those who already do from any discipline: dance, karate, baseball, soccer, etc., to observe and assist in some kids' activities. Look for start children's classes at a local community center, YMCA, dance schools and sports groups.

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• Pilates for our older
• clients are stunning.

ELDERLY CLIENTS

There are many physical challenges to be aware of when working with older people, says Carrie Clark-Campbell, Power Pilates senior teacher trainer in New York City, who works with many elderly clients. These include osteoporosis, herniated discs, spinal stenosis, high blood pressure, foot issues (many of her clients wear light sneakers to protect their feet) and arthritis. Clark-Campbell explains that the goal is a “program of maintenance, not progression.”

Educate yourself

It is wise to learn as much as you can about these ailments. Consult with doctors, physical therapists and/or check out the websites of the National Osteoporosis Foundation, the Arthritis Foundation, the Mayo Clinic, AARP and the National Institutes of Health.

For instance, people with osteoporosis should avoid high-impact workouts, such as Jumpboard exercises. They should also avoid moves that involve bending forward and twisting at the waist, which can put pressure on the bones in the spine, increasing the risk of compression fractures. People with arthritis should start their sessions with moves that emphasize flexibility to warm up and improve their range of motion. Make sure clients with high blood pressure are not holding their breath, and keep springs light.

Even when they want to do more advanced exercises that they may see others doing, keep the emphasis on what they can safely do. Remind them of how much they've accomplished and then give them an exercise they can perform confidently.

Dealing with mental issues

Mental and emotional issues like dementia and Alzheimer's or depression can also affect a session. Clark-Campbell says that there is a lot more re-teaching of technique and less cueing for those clients. Depression can weigh heavily on elderly clients. Teach with a positive attitude and keep the focus on the session.

Clark-Campbell warns of the “fine line between caretaker and Pilates instructor.” Clark-Campbell recalls one 87-year-old client who was constantly complaining about her 96-year-old boyfriend's health issues during her session. Clark-Campbell had to work really hard so that the session focused on her client's movement and not a therapy session about her boyfriend's issues. Allow



You may need to assist elderly clients to get up and down off the mat safely.

conversation when needed, but remember, you are there to give a positive movement experience.

Make them comfortable

Make sure there is a good place to sit to easily remove their shoes. It is often not easy for them to get up and down from the floor or just hold their balance. This also means you should try and do the matwork on the Cadillac.

When working in their home

First make sure the area is set up appropriately. Keep the television off and pets out of the room. Make sure you position yourself where you are well lit (be sure the light isn't behind you, making it difficult to see). Because there is no Cadillac at home, teach your client how to kneel to sit to the floor and get up. Be prepared to safely help your client up and down. If it's not possible to work on the floor at all, then do the matwork on her bed.

Extreme rewards

The benefits of Pilates for our older clients are stunning. Improved balance, strength, flexibility and stamina are just the start. Hearing a client say, “I can lean down and tie my shoe effortlessly” is an amazing reward.

Study more

Many continuing education programs offer workshops on elderly clients. (They're also frequently offered at conferences.) Carrie Clark-Campbell teaches one for Power Pilates. Also, Karena Thek Lineback offers full weekend workshops on osteoporosis and Pilates; get more information at osteopilates.com. Also, AARP.com offers wonderful free articles on all topics related to aging.

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