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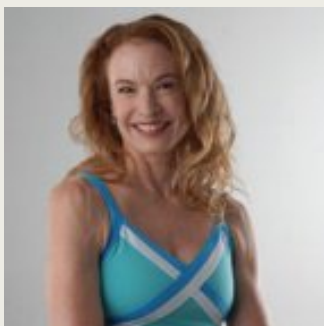
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Hands-on Guidance of the Pilates Client - by Jillian Hessel



With the ever-growing popularity of Pilates exercise in many diverse settings, hands-on guidance of the Pilates client has become a controversial subject. Lamentably, it is often left by the wayside, both in the training of Pilates teachers, as well as in the actual professional teaching setting. I learned to teach Pilates over thirty years ago. Back then, learning how to teach was an on-the-job apprentice position, as there was no official certification program in existence. My training consisted of a concentrated period lasting about a year and half, in which I simultaneously worked out at Kathy Grant's Boutique Studio located in Henri Bendel's Department Store in Manhattan, whilst apprenticing and teaching for Carola Trier.

Hands-on guidance of the client during certain exercises was rigorously coached by both women, and Carola even went so far as to critique and coach the form and

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body position of her apprentice teachers, as well as their hands on guidance of the client. Her reasons for this were twofold: first, she wanted to ensure that each client was getting the correct active resistance and guidance to enhance their session. Second, she insisted on training her apprentice teachers to take care of their own bodies, while they were providing the expected services required day after day for the clients. I know this was certainly an essential part of my training with Carola, else I wouldn't have been able to teach hour upon hour, day after day, for the past thirty years!

I recently took part in a five day Winter Symposium hosted by the Pilates Center in Boulder Colorado, which focused on the rich heritage we have inherited from five of our revered 1st generation teachers: Eve Gentry, Ron Fletcher, Kathy Grant, Carola Trier, and Romana Kryzanowa. I was honored to be invited to present the work of Carola Trier to an enthusiastic group of nearly 50 teachers. In reviewing archival footage of Carola in action, as well as reviewing my own experiences learning to teach in her Studio, I realized how truly hands on Carola was with her clients, and also how hands on my training was.

Today, Pilates is taught in large Fitness Clubs, as well as more intimate Private Studios. Often the regulations in a fitness club setting are quite stringent against Personal Trainers doing any kind of touching of the client during the course of leading an exercise session. Even though Pilates Teachers may have been taught a more hands on approach to leading an Pilates exercise session, they're grouped under the same liability insurance as a standard Personal trainer in a Club setting. Therefore, they must abide by the same "no-touch" regulations as other personal trainers. This often means no touching or hands on guidance in a Pilates session.

Why are these regulations in place, primarily? Probably not because trainers are injuring their clients by touching them, although this is certainly one potential risk/liability. Another reason is the danger of a sexual harassment lawsuit, in particular when a trainer is working with a client of the opposite sex. It is a shame that fear of improper touching has lead to a complete loss of this vital pathway for teaching and cuing more perfect form in the execution of the movement. Certainly this is one of the precepts that Joseph Pilates strove for, and when we view archival films of him teaching, he is "all over" his clients, poking prodding and cajoling them into better alignment and proper form.

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For this reason, I prefer to teach continuing educational seminars and teacher training workshops for private studios, rather than in health club settings. I have found that teachers in the Club setting by necessity are focused more on learning more and more new exercises, rather than on how to teach and refine and enhance the original repertoire. Additionally, with all the ongoing creativity in designing "new and better" Pilates equipment, it is certainly easy to get caught up in the craze to find new variations on exercises to keep fickle clients engaged. However, I feel that in the continual search for something new, we are losing our way and perhaps diluting the original path we have been given.

So, the question is: what is a Pilates teacher to do about the white elephant in the room: the issue of touching and guiding a client, hands on fashion? Obviously, we must always remain professional, and also within our scope of practice. If you are allowed to touch clients in your teaching setting, you should inform the client during your very first session together that Pilates involves hands on guidance. You need to be sure that your client is ok with this before any touching occurs! Next, knowing how, when and where to touch are important techniques that need to be learned and practiced, so you must be both knowledgeable, experienced and confident in this department. Hopefully, you have attended a proper teacher training programme, in which there has been enough time allotted to practice these skills!

If you are teaching in a "no touch" environment, however, then you will need to evolve different methods of feedback for your clients. These might include: demonstrating the exercise yourself both correctly and incorrectly, the client using their own hands or fingers to provide tactile feedback or guidance, a mirror in which to view their form as they execute an exercise, props, and of course concise verbal instruction using metaphors or imagery that "click" for the client. Remember, one size does NOT fit all, as some clients are visual learners, some tactile, and still others will respond to a visualization.

In conclusion, it is a continual process of learning, both for you, and for your client as you continue to progress them through an exercise programme. It is your job to be professional, inspirational, protect your own body as you teach and also to remain a good role model at all times. Remember that Pilates is a mental, emotional and spiritual undertaking, as well as a physical workout, stay within your scope of practice, and you should be able to guide and coach wonderful Pilates

sessions for years to come!

Jillian Hessel, a former ballet dancer, has been teaching Pilates for over 30 years. Her mentors include Pilates Elders Kathy Grant, Carola Trier and Ron Fletcher. Among Pilates aficionados, she is nicknamed "the teachers' teacher," and is known for her concise verbal instruction and clear imagery. She is the author of "Pilates Basics," and is featured in several Pilates exercise videos produced by Gaiam, International, and also in many self-produced DVD's for Pilates teachers.

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