

THE POWER OF PILATES

Despite humble beginnings in a First World War POW camp, Pilates is now practised in studios, homes and parks all over the world. We speak to the Wellbeing team's very own Pilates instructor, Nathalie Clough, on how it can fortify both our physical and mental wellbeing.



Classic Pilates
exercise: rolling
like a ball

Though Pilates has soared in popularity during the last decade, it was first developed in the early 20th century by Joseph Pilates and was known as 'Contrology'. Joseph was motivated to develop his unique exercises by a sickly childhood, during which he'd suffered bouts of asthma, rickets and rheumatoid fever. 'In his search to find an alternative way to build his body's defence against illness, Joseph turned to exercise and began working on his muscle imbalances and improving his posture,' Pilates instructor Nathalie Clough explains. 'This was an entirely new approach - he was way before his time.'

When war broke out across Europe in 1914, however, the German-born Pilates was interred in a prisoner of

Words: Ellie Smith

war camp in England. The living conditions and health of prisoners in the camps was poor, but Pilates insisted that every internee in his cell-block participate in a series of simple strengthening exercises to help maintain their physical and mental wellbeing. 'Treating sickly inmates, he saw the real power of his exercises,' says Nathalie. 'For bed-bound patients, he created low-impact resistance-based exercises using the springs from their beds to build strength and fitness. It was here that the spring-based Pilates apparatus we still use today was born.'

In sickness and in health

Just as Joseph was able to use makeshift equipment to cater to bedridden inmates, Pilates continues to be a

flexible practice that is particularly beneficial to those with injuries or a lack of mobility. 'It's low-impact and can be tailored to an individual's needs,' says Nathalie. 'A few years ago I had several operations on my feet and couldn't walk, but I was still able to work out every day, working around my injury and challenging my core, arms and legs instead.'

This doesn't mean Pilates isn't for the more athletic among us, however. Nathalie sees a full range of clients in her practice: 'I've had people come to me with issues ranging from a complete lack of mobility, to wanting to improve strength for Iron Man competitions. There's a diversity of exercises and modifications to suit all levels, from beginner to advanced. While most other forms

Nathalie
demonstrates
a side plank



'In ten sessions you will feel a difference, in 20 you will see the difference, and in 30 you will have a whole new body'



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of exercise are fast-paced and activate large muscle groups (shortening and bulking the muscles), Pilates lengthens the muscles and focuses on the small, supporting muscles, preventing injury.'

'In my view it's the best form of exercise, although I'm obviously biased!' Nathalie adds. 'If you only want to do Pilates you will be strong and flexible, but if you love running or cycling, you will also improve your performance by doing Pilates. This is because of the emphasis on strengthening the "powerhouse" (a Pilates term for the abdominals, pelvic floor, lower back, hips and glutes). A strong "powerhouse" will allow your other muscle groups to work harder for longer as you learn to draw strength from your core.'

Mind over matter

There's no question that Pilates can work wonders for physical wellbeing. One of Nathalie's favourite quotes from Joseph Pilates is: 'In ten sessions you will feel a difference, in 20 you will see the difference, and in 30 you will have a whole new body.'

For many Pilates devotees, however, the mental benefits are just as important. In fact, Joseph was heavily influenced by Ancient Greek ideals. These early wellbeing warriors believed healthy humans should be equally balanced in mind, body and spirit. For this reason, as Nathalie explains, 'Pilates is based around six core principles - control, centring, concentration, breath, precision and flow.'

'My mind is a busy place a lot of the time, but Pilates helps to quieten this noise, as you really have to focus on the exercises and there's no room for the mind to wander,' says Nathalie. The sense of calm and focus is particularly noticeable when we do Pilates as a team in the Wellbeing Studios. After a few minutes of chatter, we quickly settle into a focused silence, broken only by Nathalie's gentle corrections and the occasional groan during a challenging glute series.

For Nathalie, the benefits can far outlast a one-hour session: 'As you focus on the movements, your stress levels and blood pressure come down, and over time your mind becomes trained to stay more focused in everyday life. What's not to love?'

'As you focus on the movements, your stress levels and blood pressure come down'

The 100

Nathalie is evangelical about the 100, an exercise that works the core like no other, and is safe and easy to do at home. She recommends doing it every morning and evening like you would brush your teeth.

To give it a go, start by lying on your back, knees bent, feet flat and arms down by your side. Curl your head, neck and shoulders off the mat and reach your hands towards the end of the mat. Start pumping the arms vigorously, breathing in and out for the count of five. Repeat ten times.

To challenge the core more, lift the legs up to a tabletop position or, for even more a challenge, lengthen the



legs away from the body and lower towards the floor. Stop if your back comes away from the mat.

Follow Nathalie on asteriapilates.com and on Instagram @asteriapilates

Getting started

While we recommend booking a class or some one-on-one time with a Pilates instructor, Pilates was designed to be portable and accessible - it can be practised anywhere, by anyone. 'We all lead very busy lives, so I like to add exercises to "dead time",' Nathalie advises. 'Instead of sitting on the sofa watching TV, get on to the floor and stretch out your body, do some glute exercises or even work your core. Just five minutes when you would have been doing nothing will have an impact and really help to change your body if done on a regular basis.'

If you're looking to take Pilates to the next level, however, there's a whole world of apparatus to try. 'The Reformer is a magical piece of apparatus,' says Nathalie, 'the secret is the springs that provide extra resistance, prevent you from resting and ensure the muscles are lengthened and toned.'

'If you're really looking to up your game, don't just look for a Reformer studio, look for a Classical studio,' she adds. 'You will be introduced to the Cadillac, the Wunda Chair, the Tower and not to mention the lesser-known pieces like the High Chair and Pedipole, which are sure to give you the burn you crave.' 