Pilates: Managing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

'TRAUMA IS A FACT OF LIFE... BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE A LIFE SENTENCE'
Peter A Levine

Allison Flores Vega
January 2016
South Pasadena, CA
Berkeley, CA
Abstract

Trauma is the most avoided, ignored, denied, misunderstood, and untreated cause of human suffering. When I use the word trauma, I am talking about the often debilitating symptoms that many people suffer from the aftermath of perceived life-threatening or over-whelming experiences, incidents or accidents. Recently, trauma has been used as a buzzword to replace everyday stress. However this use is completely misleading. **While it is true that all traumatic events are stressful, all stressful events are not traumatic.**" Peter A Levine phd.

Unresolved trauma can be the underlying force that drives the elusive symptoms such as panic, depression, migraines', irritable bowel, ME, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chronic pain, which when left in the body's tissue become our ailments and our illnesses. Trauma response is a specific defensive bodily 'reaction' that people initially mobilize in order to protect themselves against feeling the totality of the horror, pain or helplessness felt within the situation, accident or incident (Peter A. Levine phd). However, if this bodily 'defense' response is not fully completed, often due to suppression, medication or fear at the time of the incident, it gets literally 'frozen' into the body's neurofascial system. Emotions of defeat, humiliation, shame and a host of physical symptoms associated with the 'reaction' to the original event replays itself over and over again deep in the body's tissue, detached from history but experienced in the present as sensations and symptoms. This state of unresolved trauma can be the underlying force that drives the elusive symptoms such as panic, depression, migraines, irritable bowel, ME, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia and chronic pain. Which when left in the body's tissue become our ailments and our illnesses.

Candace B. Pert, PhD, acclaimed mind/body theorist and scientist, believes that the body is actually the "unconscious mind" a term so often used in Analytical Psychology. Because the unconscious is thought to be the royal road to transformation in this psychological tradition, the body, in Pert’s opinion, is the bridge between the mind and spirit as well as the path to transformational healing and individuation. In her book Molecules of Emotion, she advocates passive bodywork such as energy work, shiatsu or deep tissue massage. However, I believe that Pilates and other alignment-based active therapy are a much more profound solution when dealing with the issue of trauma.
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It is believed that the brain receives a holographic imprint of a trauma event and that the simultaneous recording of that event is stored in the body’s tissue. When there is a stimulus that replicates any part of the original trauma event, the brain, functioning as a processor, activates the response mechanism.

If you were to adopt an animal that has been abused and touch the area(s) of abuse, that animal reacts, it is not the animal’s brain but the tissue memory. PTSD needs to be addressed on a whole body basis and not just by changing the impulses of the brain chemically. That would not be a cure, simply a compensation for an existing condition.

Pilates is a whole body practice that connects the mind with the body.

In developing his Contrology method, Joseph Pilates combines both eastern and the western concepts by including mental focus and specific breathing of yoga with the ancient Greek and Roman exercise systems. Pilates provides complete coordination of body, mind and spirit. Contrology is based on principles which enable to increase attention, motivation and enhance cognitive functions while minimizing stress on the body.

Impact of pilates on attention, motivation and cognitive functions factors can be represented by the following structure:
Pilates is active; meaning just by physical participation the client is taking responsibility for and acquiring the tools to heal. Pilates also promotes consciousness. In contrast to passive therapies, the client must be fully present to execute the exercises properly. The client is given an opportunity to feel emotions and bodily sensations in a safe environment. The instructor, who is skilled in the subtler movement dysfunctions, uses the Pilates repertoire as a template with which to bring awareness to the freedoms and limitations within the client’s body. Utilizing the BASI Block System instructors can choose specific movements to best address the specific needs for each individual client.
Case Study

The following BASI program was built for a 45 year old woman, Joy, who suffers from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after being in an abusive relationship where she was physically, sexually and emotionally abused. While in the relationship her abuser controlled everything she did and Pilates was her first escape and step towards healing. Abused women are often ashamed and fearful of reaching out for help because they feel that they are at fault. Lack of self-esteem and isolation often take over making it difficult to seek the help that is needed. Joy also needed “permission” from her abuser to do anything. She was able to convince her abuser that she needed Pilates to heal an injury she suffered from his violent attacks. The supportive environment and focus towards mental and physical healing was just what Joy needed to find the strength to leave the relationship and live a life without abuse.

Joy participated in a 30 week BASI Pilates program, which was accompanied by individual and group therapy. While doing an assessment of Joy’s physical fitness, it was obvious that her body was showing the effects of her trauma. Her posture and deflated demeanor reflected the anxiety and stress from the assaults. It was apparent that the emotional pain had manifested itself physically as her body withdrew containing her internal struggle. She had weak upper back extensors, tight pectorals and very little scapular strength. Her abdominals were weak causing her thoracic spine to be overly flexed causing chronic pain from being out of alignment. We also needed to address the importance of the breath patterns to help focus on the important mind-body connection needed to focus on the goal of helping Joy cope with the anxiety and panic attacks to facilitate the recovery process.

Joy had no previous experience or practice with Pilates so we needed to start from a fundamental level. The response was immediate and very effective. Joy advanced physically to an intermediate level after about 20 sessions, but the psychological benefits were immediate. After the very first session she felt energized and empowered like she hadn’t in a very long time. The first 10 sessions focused on basic fundamentals. These sessions were much needed for having Joy to start learning to become aware of her body, focusing on controlled breathing and connecting to isolated muscle groups.

Fundamental
Warm Up
Pelvic Curl, Spine Twist Supine, Chest Lift, Chest Lift with Rotation

Footwork
The Wunda Chair was chosen to specifically work with Joy’s posture challenges. Since the trunk stabilizers are engaged throughout the series it provides a great opportunity to focus on lengthening the spine as she performs the footwork. With the back extensors and abdominals both working to keep her upright the chair adds additional strengthening benefits.
Parallel Heels, Parallel Toes, V-Toes, Wide Heels, Wide Toes.
Abdominals

Hundred Prep, after 5 sessions, the Hundred. The isometric contraction provided Joy with the opportunity to focus on controlled repetitive breathing allowing her to focus inward. This would be a useful tool to use when she was feeling anxious or stressed. The Short Box Series included exercises to encourage Joy to co-contract her abdominals and back extensors simultaneously while stabilizing her trunk to help strengthen her posture.

Hip Work

Working with both the single and double leg series on the Cadillac.(frog, circles, walking, bicycle) we focused on strengthening her hamstrings and improve hip disassociation while stabilizing her pelvis.

Spinal Articulation
After the first ten sessions Joy was feeling strong enough to understand and incorporate spinal articulation into her session. We started with the Bottom Lift on the Reformer and advanced after 10 more sessions we moved to the Cadillac for the Tower Prep and Tower. Those exercise were chosen for the engagement of the hamstrings through the spinal articulation.

Stretches
The Standing Lunge and Kneeling Lunge were chosen for Joy to stretch and open up the shoulders and chest and stretch the hamstrings. Also used was the Shoulder Stretch Side on the Step Barrel, which allows focus on the latissimus dorsi and pectorals while allowing the shoulders and thoracic spine to stretch.

Full Body Integration 1
After 10 sessions we introduced Round Back and Flat Back to better engage her transverse abdominals and back extensors. These exercises were effective as the objective was to target her weaknesses; trunk stabilization, shoulder stabilization, hip extensor strength, knee extensor strength.

Arm Work
We started arm work on the reformer with the Supine Series specifically for the latissimus dorsi work. After 10 sessions, Joy advanced to the Arms Sitting Series which was very important because of the rhomboid/pectoral work it provided. It was also chosen for the opportunity to work on her back extensors and abdominals working together to keep her posture upright.

Full Body Integration 2
We introduced FBI2 after 30 sessions when Joy felt she was ready to increase her
strength and body awareness. We started with Up Stretch 1 and Elephant which progressed into Down Stretch and Up Stretch 2. After feeling more confidence with her strength we worked on Balance Control Front and Balance Control Back Prep to focus on scapular stabilization, latissimus doors, and lower trapezius strength.

Leg Work
We chose Hamstring Curl and Leg Press Standing for leg work and progressed quickly to the intermediate level Backward Step Down. The balance required for the last two exercises provided the extra mental challenge that was so important for building much needed confidence.

Lateral Flexion/Rotation
Working on the mat we started with Spine Twist and Saw. After 10 sessions we started working on the Reformer doing Side Overs and Mermaid.

Back Extension
At the fundamental level we worked on the mat focusing on isolation her thoracic and lumbar spine. We used the Cat Stretch for this exercise. We later advanced to the Reformer to work on Breaststroke Prep, Breaststroke and Pulling Straps 1 and 2.

Not only did the physical exercises transform Joy’s health and mind, but the escape from her abusive environment to a safe, supportive and healthy Pilates studio everyday was extremely beneficial to healing. The other clients were inspired by her courageous story and gave her the much needed support in a non-judgemental, safe place. As stated in the BASI CTTC Study guide, benefits of Pilates include that the importance of setting goals allows us to strive towards improvements. Having goals that were healthy to strive for encouraged Joy to make herself a priority, giving her the strength to transform her life. Just as Pilates can transform the body from the inside out, practicing this method can offer profound psychological healing form deep within. For the first time in years Joy was able to use her powerful mind body connection and strength to help cope with the trauma that was robbing her of joy in life. She felt powerful in ways she never dreamed possible and for the first time in her entire life she felt she was in control of her own body. Joy’s posture after discovering her own self-worth with the help of Pilates demonstrates a strong and empowered woman of survival. Wanting to help others transform their lives from the debilitating effects of trauma, Joy is now a Pilates student for life and is studying for her BASI Certification!
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