

10 Scientifically Proven Benefits of Pilates for Your Peace of Mind

Pilates is more than just a workout. Any person who's been doing it for at least a couple of months knows that Pilates doesn't only sculpt your body but it also clears your mind and gives you energy and inner serenity. But what is so special about. Most people come to a Pilates class to get a flat tummy, ease joint pains and discomforts, rehabilitate after a surgery or improve their athletic performance. And Pilates can do all of that! But the most amazing part happens when students start seeing changes not only in their bodies but also in their minds, in their emotions and in their lives altogether. I'm partial, of course, but Pilates is a true miracle tool. Modern world is full of distractions, stresses and chaos. Each one of us is looking for a personal state of peace and tranquility that would help us make sense of everything that is going on in our lives. When searching for that inner balance we usually consider popular self-improvement techniques like meditation, simplifying, affirmations etc. but we rarely consider any form of exercise as a viable tool to help us balance our lives.

The Pilates Method of Body Conditioning is complete coordination of body, mind, and spirit. ~ Joseph Pilates

1. Pilates improves your memory and makes you smarter.

Beginning in our late 20s most of us start losing about 1% of the volume of our hippocampus, a portion of the brain responsible for memory and cognitive function. Our brains are literally shrinking. For a long time scientists thought that we were born with a certain number of brain cells but recently they discovered that our brains could create new cells thus slowing down or reversing brain shrinkage. What will it mean to you? It means better memory, lower risks of Alzheimer's disease, better learning and problem solving, a higher IQ and more. Several recent studies have proved that exercise improves neurogenesis – creation of new brain cells – as well as protects existing cells by prompting an increase in BDNF production – a nerve protecting compound that some scientists call "Miracle-Gro" for the brain. The changes are mostly noticeable in the hippocampus, the region responsible for memories and learning. Another group of researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign reported in the Journal of Physical Activity & Health that people have significantly superior brain function after a mindful movement practice like Pilates compared to aerobic exercise.

2. Pilates trains your brain.

Learning new activities is a proven brain-training technique. Heidi Johansen Berg and her colleagues from the University of Oxford have discovered that learning new activities increases the density of white matter in the brain (the fibers that let neurons communicate.) If the neurons are formed but they don't connect then eventually they die without any benefit to brain health so this white matter is extremely important. Learning a new activity is an important part of brain fitness. But most of us don't have an extra several hours a week to learn how to juggle (that is what Heidi Johansen Berg used in her research) or take on a new hobby. An exercise program however can be just the right way to multitask – benefit our body and our mind at the same time. If you start to automatize your workout (like running on a treadmill while watching TV, doing reps at the gym without focusing on your form or flying through the same Yoga sequence every week) you cut the benefit of your workout in half (not even mentioning that you double the risk of an injury.) According to Anne Bishop, a Pilates instructor and researcher, learning a new movement or a new modification in a Pilates routine provides just the effect we are looking for by challenging the body and mind at the same time.

3. Deeper muscle activation means better function of the nervous system.

Every time we move we use several specific areas of our brain. The brain then sends an impulse through the spinal cord to muscle fibers (the process is more complicated than that and requires a bunch of words that my spell checker doesn't even know.) When you learn to voluntarily engage certain muscles (like deep core activation in Pilates) you fire a movement chain that might have been asleep for a long time. Did you know that your core consists of 29 muscles and not just a six-pack? Learning to use them is a cleansing rinse for your nervous system. A healthy nervous system means better communication between your brain and other parts of your body as well as the release of stress-fighting and mood-boosting hormones.

4. Calm mind and emotions with Pilates.

You have probably heard a lot about the benefits of mindfulness meditation for your mind and body. To sum them up, meditation:

- relieves anxiety and depression,
- helps treat insomnia,
- sharpens the mind,
- uncovers creative thinking,
- relieves stress,
- helps with chronic pain management,
- reduces negative emotions,
- helps fight addictions and instill positive habits,
- lowers blood pressure and improve cardio vascular health.

When most of us think about meditation we imagine a Buddhist monk or a New Age person chanting in solitude. But perhaps we are wrong as we envision only one way that mindfulness can enter our lifestyle. According to Ellen Langer, one of the pioneer researchers of mindfulness, *Though the concept originates in ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Chinese traditions, when it comes to experimental psychology, mindfulness is less about spirituality and more about concentration: the ability to quiet your mind, focus your attention on the present, and dismiss any distractions that come your way.* Pilates lets you concentrate your attention on one thing – your body. Whether you want it or not, you have to clear your mind of any distractions if you are performing Pilates coordination work on the Reformer or if you are just visualizing an inner spring in your core that your instructor is talking about. Pilates lets you reap all the benefits of meditation without actually sitting still and feeling like you are wasting your time. You can gain mindfulness benefits only if you are comfortable with what you are doing. Some enjoy the peacefulness of a traditional meditation while others get better results from a mindful movement that cleanses the mind while exercising the body.

5. Pilates relieves stress tension in our body.

You have probably heard about the famous “fight-or-flight” response to stressful situations. When confronted with a stressful situation (real, like almost getting in a car wreck or imaginative, like fear of public speaking) our body releases a wave of stress hormones to prime our body to fight or flee. In a stressful situation our body is ready to move at its peak performance but in most modern-day scenarios we can’t run away when stuck in a traffic jam and can’t pick a fight with our boss. Physical activity is supposed to metabolize the buildup of stress hormones but instead we try to keep everything inside and work our way through it. The result? Stress hormones settle in our body causing hypertension, muscle spasms and pain. Pilates relieves tension built up in the muscles through gentle stretching and gradual conditioning. An energetic Jumpboard workout will let you metabolize stress hormones built up in your muscles. And fascial release techniques that many Pilates instructors use in their classes today will help you loosen tight muscles that are not responsive to passive stretching. When you get stress out of your body, you also get it out of your mind.

A body free from nervous tension and fatigue is the ideal shelter provided by nature for housing a well balanced mind, fully capable of successfully meeting all the complex problems of modern living.

~ Joseph Pilates

6. Pilates makes you happier.

If you love Pilates then it will make you happier. When our body is positively stressed, like when you go through a favorite workout, endorphins are released into the body that make us feel good. If you enjoy your workout and stay focused on it instead of letting your mind wander somewhere else you will feel happy and calm at the end.

Physical fitness is the first requisite of happiness.

~Joseph Pilates

7. Pilates lets you control your emotions.

Our emotions and breathing are closely connected. A recent study by Pierre Phillipot (as cited by [Psychology Today](#)) showed that different emotional states are associated with distinct breathing patterns. Think of how your breathing changes when you face something frightening as opposed to something pleasant. There is no major breakthrough in this finding, just common sense. However, the interesting part of the study was that different breathing patterns evoke certain emotions. You can basically breathe yourself into calmness or anxiety. Breath is one of the six fundamental Pilates principles. Learning to control your breath is probably the biggest benefit of Pilates since many of us are “lazy-breathers”. The techniques that you learn in a Pilates class can also be used in different life situations to calm your mind or get through a stressful situation.

Above all, learn to breathe correctly.

~Joseph Pilates

8. Mindful Movement helps release emotional tension.

Any mind/body professional can tell a lot about your personality by simply looking at your posture and observing your movement. Over time we store our emotions and anxieties in our body. We clench our jaws when we want to yell, slouch when we feel inferior or shy, and tighten our hips to suppress emotions of sadness and fear. Pilates practice lets you release your muscles and gain control of the deep core muscles that tend to be closely connected to your emotional baggage. When you release muscles that hold your emotional tension you also let go of the emotional baggage that you’ve been carrying around for who knows how long.

9. Pilates teaches you to be yourself.

The modern world puts us under a lot of stress because we constantly feel the need to conform to certain standards. We constantly have to push our boundaries to meet a deadline, be a better parent or look an act according to modern-day standards. Pilates teaches us to respect our body and be content with it. Pilates practice is focused on working within your range of motion and building up your strength and flexibility gradually. Interesting enough, once we become confident in what we are doing we find strength and motivation to move to the next level. However, our progress is not propelled by comparing ourselves to someone else but rather by setting our personal standards and priorities that are meaningful to us. When we learn to respect our bodies this way we also learn to do the same with everything else in our lives. We start living according to our priorities and desires, instead of keeping up with the Joneses.

10. Become more confident.

In her TED Talk, [social psychologist Amy Cuddy](#) discusses how the “power” posture boosts confidence levels. I hope you listened to your Mama when she told you to sit up straight and straighten up because it is the exact posture that makes us more confident. Pilates is all about good posture and proper body alignment. Of course, good posture is important for your health but you will also gain the confidence benefit from it.

Through the Pilates Method of Body Conditioning this unique trinity of a balanced body, mind and spirit can ever be attained. Self confidence follows.

~Joseph Pilates

If you didn’t have enough reasons to try Pilates or to fit another class into your schedule then hopefully you do now. Let your body and mind enjoy all that Pilates has to offer: Intelligent movement for smart people!