

Keeping Group Classes Safe



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By Leslee Bender

With the continuing boom of Pilates, many health clubs and wellness centers are experiencing a growing problem - too many clients and not enough instructors. Yet some still try to accommodate the demand, which can lead to group classes – mat in particular – that are too large. Unruly to manage, large classes also make it difficult for instructors to supervise each participant, a must in Pilates.

In addition, many of these instructors may have attended a short, one- or two-day workshop before beginning to teach traditional Pilates movements. This, quite simply, can lead to injury. I do not believe that traditional Pilates exercises were meant to be learned in a weekend. It is a long, ongoing process where trainers need to feel it in their own bodies in order to properly explain or demonstrate it to clients.

Traditional Pilates movements were designed in an era when modern health clubs did not exist. Joseph Pilates worked with clients who learned to perform the correct exercise movements by practicing them over a long period of time. However, at some club facilities a sedentary, middle-aged woman can now walk into a class for the first time and undertake *swan dives*, *rollovers*, and *rollups*, even when she may not know how to find her core stabilizers. This is a recipe for a dissatisfied client. I guarantee you that woman will leave the class with an aching back and wondering if it was her incompetence. She most likely will not come back.

In my years in the fitness industry I have encountered a lot of very effective mat classes and instructors. Unfortunately, I have also observed classes where advanced movements have been taught to varying skill levels, even when the movement quality was visibly terrible. We, as Pilates professionals, need to look at each and every exercise and analyze the purpose of it - who it is appropriate for and why - before implementing it in a class session.

We also need to look at which clients might be at risk of injury. I've always tried to build class choreography by starting with the easiest combination. If clients struggle, we then break down the movement even more. In this way, we keep the class challenging for many different levels while reducing the chance of injury or frustration.

Here are suggestions on how to keep your group mat classes safe:

Modification

The essential effectiveness of Pilates is based on the fact that the exercises can be modified to best meet the needs of clients of any shape or size. Yet many of us forget this at times. A good instructor must know how to adapt the exercises to suit each member's level of ability. As an example, advanced students might be able to lift the head higher or extend the legs to make the exercise more challenging. Those with less ability can keep their bodies in the "easier" mode and still get a good workout.

Instructor Protocol

As Pilates instructors we need to remember that teaching should not be treated as an opportunity for a personal workout. When I see a trainer performing in front of a class and never leaving that area, I know he or she cannot be aware of the bad movement being performed by students throughout the classroom. Instructors should continually move around the room, carefully watching each participant, cueing, and helping those who need it.

Class Size

Ideally, a mat class should have no more than 12-15 participants. I personally feel this number may still be a bit high, but it is a much more workable one for clubs where 20-30 participants is not uncommon. Instructors in our program are required to commit to practical training hours in a club: offering small group demos on correct posture, attaining "crucial" neutral spine and why it is important, and pre-Pilates exercises. This gives the group class member a better understanding of Pilates, and a better chance of succeeding in a potentially overcrowded class.

Preventing Injuries

Coupled with keeping class size small, consider requiring private sessions prior to allowing a client to join a group class. The private session helps you determine whether that individual is ready to join a group. If not, then more private sessions are needed. I would rather not take a student than put them in a group for which they are not ready.

Several exercises currently taught in mat classes can lead to possible injury when not performed 100% correctly – like the *Roll Up*. Props are a good way to add necessary support to these exercises. For example, here's how to use the mini ball to modify the *Roll Up*, making it safer yet still effective.



It is recommended that all beginning participants utilize a mini ball to support the spine while rolling back.



Begin with the mini ball behind the spine. Inhale to prepare, then exhale slowly rolling over the ball while keeping the spine supported. Do not go back very far, only until you feel your core activating.