

Pilates Rehabilitation for Multiple Sclerosis

Multiple Sclerosis is a degenerative neurological disorder of unknown causes. It is not contagious but progressive, unpredictable and incurable & most prevalent amongst young Caucasian women living in temperate zones. There also appears to be a genetic link - between 10 and 20% of people with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) have a relative with the disease.

MS is one of many autoimmune disorders in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own body tissues. In the case of MS the immune system attacks the myelin, a protective sheath around the nerve fibres of the brain and spinal cord. These lesions distort and interrupt messages sent from the brain to the body, often occurring at multiple points in the central nervous system. There are many symptoms, although no 2 people will share the same ones.

The most common symptoms MS sufferers have to manage include muscle weakness, loss of balance and coordination, fatigue, loss of mobility and problems with memory function. Treatment varies according to the course the disease takes and the frequency and severity of acute episodes. Drugs are used to shorten the duration of relapses or attacks, ease symptoms and slow the progression of the disease.

Some complimentary therapies and gentle forms of exercise have been found to be helpful, the most widely used being acupuncture, massage, chiropractic, Bowen therapy or myofascial release and meditation. Regular practise of Pilates or yoga is used around the world as an effective way of addressing the all important issue of maintaining mobility and therefore social contact & quality of life. For this population the right kind of exercise must be supervised, non- impact, mindful movement that can improve mental function, prevent or alleviate depression & reduce stress.

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People with MS need non-aerobic exercise without fatigue or overheating which can cause nausea or flu-like symptoms. Muscles may function at 20% or less of normal, meaning lactic acid overload can happen easily. Pilates integrates breath control into exercises to coordinate the movement, the meditative nature of which can be extremely beneficial. Close supervision when exercising is important to minimize the risk of injury when balance and coordination are compromised. It has been found that Pilates classes in a studio with a high teacher/client ratio can provide a safe and successful movement experience.

Studios world wide, and especially in the US, offer classes specifically for this patient population which includes other degenerative neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease. In the Pilates studio, an instructor is able to guide clients through movements and stretches comfortably on equipment that is fully adjustable for each individual, and assist clients transferring from one piece of equipment to another. A session would focus on body awareness, postural control, breathing technique, core stabilisation, spinal articulation and flexibility, with particular attention to the fact that muscle memory in this population is poor, therefore repetition is paramount. An instructor needs also to be aware that a session is about making movement a positive experience rather than striving for perfection - it needs to make them feel good and want to continue.

As with many chronic disorders, once there's a diagnosis, it's all about management and having resources and services to draw on to make life as pleasant and productive as possible. Clients will have good and bad days, but all exercises can be modified and they may be surprised at what they can do on a good day.

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