



all the right moves

we learn to assess new
clients mainly through
experience, but sometimes
the simplest exercises can
be the most revealing

BY KATE ARTIBEE

When a new client comes into my studio, Sanctuary Pilates and Wellness in New York City, I start them off with the simplest exercises in order to assess their movement patterns. Just by looking at the alignment of his or her body within the frame of the machine or mat, I am able to identify any imbalances.

Yesterday, for instance, I was working with a brand-new client, and I had her begin with Rolldowns on the Cadillac, followed by footwork on the Reformer. Her hips and spine were neutral, her lats and lower trapezius were well balanced, and her pectoralis major and minor had reasonable degrees of flexibility. But I immediately noticed that she had extremely tight cervical extensors (though no other signs of kyphosis). This observation helped me determine that, moving ahead, I would need to work with her on neck flexion as well as thoracic extension with limited neck extension to help her lengthen those shortened extensors.

Assessing a client can be challenging, especially for a new teacher. As Joseph Pilates reminds us in *Return to Life*, "Rome was not built in a day." At Sanctuary we see all variants of age, gender, physical levels, injury histories and proprioceptive skills. Our goal is to find ways to communicate Joe's intention to all kinds of clients to help them build their own Rome.

I was introduced to Pilates in 1997 by a dancer friend. At my first class, my mind was opened to an amazing new world of analytical, economical movement. The subsequent years of training with teachers like Melanie Johnson, Peter Roel and Stephanie Skura completely transformed my running and yoga practice as well as my attitudes toward movement. Now I aim to assist my students to improve their movement patterns as well. Our program at Sanctuary combines classical Pilates choreography with a modern edge and is informed by my background in anatomy, kinesiology, Alexander Technique, Skinner Releasing and ashtanga and hatha yoga.

When it comes to evaluating a new client's body, my first piece of advice is to start with the simplest exercises. Patterns that you identify in the most basic and fundamental moves will be the same ones you will see in every subsequent one. As a general rule, I like to start at the beginning, with the first two equipment exercises most of us learn: footwork and Rolldowns. Mat fundamentals (as taught by Eve Gentry) such as Bridge and Cat/Cow allow you to evaluate spinal sequencing, muscular firing patterns and breath control. The moment you see your clients moving, you can quickly notice where they are limited and what strengths they possess that you can then draw on in your teaching. ➤

bridging

purpose: enhances breath control and depth

setup: Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the mat, in parallel. Place a yoga block or small ball between your knees. Press your arms firmly into the mat, palms planted and active.

1. Exhale and, squeezing the block, raise your hips up to the ceiling, curling up bone by bone as high as you can without tilting your pelvis.

2. Inhale, lowering your hips to the mat one vertebra at a time. Do 5 repetitions.

evaluation tips:

Look for places along the back where the spine seems to jump spots, move less fluidly or disconnect. These little places will usually indicate places of tension in the back and weakness in the front. You'll need to

first make the client aware of the issue, and then teach him/her how to work through it. Use the breath to assist the flow of the movement. Keep the abs involved to pause in a neutral position on the last lift.

advanced: Encourage a high pelvic position and a slight posterior tilt, or a tuck, to increase hip extension and psoas stretch.



Your next step is to create a vocabulary that's going to be instructive to your client. Joe coined terms we still use today, including "vertebra by vertebra" and rolling your "spine like a wheel." Create your own based on what your clients might connect with. I love images that can inspire letting go such as "melt," "float" and "drop." Who doesn't like melting ribs, floating skulls and dropping shoulders?

Evaluating form on a fundamental level can enhance not only your teaching but your own practice, especially for instructors who don't take regular sessions with other teachers. Here are a few good places to start: Check the placement of your own feet within the frame of your mat:

Are they equidistant from the corners? Look at your hips in relationship to the mat: Is the space on either side of you the same? Are your arms along the same perpendicular line as your body?

The following exercises are a great way to evaluate anyone's form: yours or your clients. If you use them for clients, have them perform them as written and pay special attention to the evaluation tips at the end of each exercise. I have written them in the second person voice, however, to make it easier for you (as practitioner) to revisit them and perhaps gain new insight. By doing them yourself, you will focus on the minutiae of the move. Because, as you know, it's the little things that count!

knee folds

purpose: increases balance; promotes better posture overall

setup: Lie on your back on a mat with your legs in a high Tabletop, knees at a 90-degree angle to your hips and shins slightly higher than parallel to the ceiling. Your feet may be flexed, pointed or relaxed. Press strongly into your arms.

1. Keeping your abs engaged and your hips, back and pelvis stable, lower your right leg down to the mat, keeping your left leg in Tabletop.

2. Repeat with your left leg. Do 10 repetitions, alternating legs.

3. Inhale as you lower both legs simultaneously. Exhale as you lift your legs back to start.

evaluation tips: Look for the client's ability to stabilize the ribs and pelvis and to differentiate movement in the hips. Pay attention to any unnecessary movements within the thoracic and pelvic regions. Little wiggles between the two will indicate a loss of abdominal connection or mental focus (or both), or a tendency to dominate with one side over the other.

modification: Only lower your knees as far as you can while keeping your hips, back and pelvis stable.



cat and cow

purpose: teaches proper cueing of sequential, directional spinal movement and a continuous shoulder connection

setup: Get on all fours on a mat, knees directly underneath hips and hands directly underneath armpits.

1. Inhale and ripple through the spine like a wave on the ocean and lift the chest to the ceiling.

2. Exhale as you tuck your tailbone and pull your pelvis back (posteriorly) to curl your spine. Do 5 repetitions.

evaluation tips: Watch for sinking in the

shoulders (loss of lat connection) and dumping, or dropping, in the abs (loss of ab connection). Keep the abs engaged to avoid low back compression in the arch/cow and overstretching in the upper back during Curl/Cat pose. Maintain breath control and direction. This will come in handy with the more challenging extension exercises like Swan, Swimming and Pulling. **straps modification:** Place hands on the edge of mat or on a less padded area to avoid hyperextension of the wrists. Hold a small ball or brick between knees for centerline/inner thigh connection.



rolldowns

purpose: teaches sequential rolling through the spine; releases action from the quads and hip flexors; increases shoulder-back connection

setup: Sit on the mat facing the Tower. Place your hands wide on the Rolldown bar, keeping your arms long and your shoulder blades back and down. Keep your legs parallel, feet connected to the Tower bars (or against a foam roller), knees slightly bent.

1. Slightly drop your shoulder blades and feel your arms connect to your back.

2. Beginning with the sacrum, roll down bone by bone until your shoulders and skull are connected to the mat, keeping your spine neutral and pulling the bar along with you. Your arms should remain long.

3. Return to sitting, initiating by curling your chin toward your sternum and rolling up to sitting bone by bone. Do 3–4 repetitions. Coordinate the exhalation with the movement and the inhalation with a rest.

evaluation tips: Watch for a fully released spine, neck and shoulders at the end of the Rolldown. The client should look as though he or she could be standing perfectly aligned. Too often our clients hold on to unnecessary tension in their neck and shoulders. You can help them become aware of these unnecessary patterns and, in turn, help them have less neck and shoulder pain on a daily basis, even when they're not specifically doing Pilates with you.

modification: If a client's feet are pulling away from the Tower bars (or foam roller), have them bend their knees deeply at the beginning and keep them soft still when they are fully lying on the mat.

advanced: Perform this without the assistance of the Rolldown bar. Insist that the heels stay connected to the mat and the soles of the feet connected to the bar. Have the toes pull away from the metal bar and spread like fingers would in a downward dog.



from the feet up

Footwork is a wonderful way to view the alignment of one's body and to assess areas of imbalance or tension. Although there are many variations in choreography, the setup will be the same for most of them. Lie on your back on the Reformer carriage, feet on the footbar. Keep your shoulders back, arms long and firm by your sides and your abs and pelvic floor engaged.

1. Inhale as you press the carriage out as far as you can without hyperextending your knees. Exhale and, with control, return the carriage to its closed starting position. Do 10 repetitions of each foot position and include any or all of the possible positions in this series.

Focus on proper alignment from the very beginning of this series. Make sure your feet are precisely in the middle of the footbar. Insure that your hips, shoulders and skull are perfectly aligned with your centerline and the center of the machine. Feel your breath fill your side waist and back, and feel that your hips are maintaining a neutral position throughout. It helps to picture your body perfectly aligned as though you were standing on the floor. Notice if your heels roll in, or if your feet slide on the bar as you move. Focus on stability in your position, consistent and deep breath, and feel your abs subtly hugging you throughout.

lat pulls

purpose: instills rib cage breathing and differentiation in the shoulder

setup: Lie on your back on the Reformer carriage with your legs in Tabletop. Hold the straps in your hands. Initially your arms will be extended to the ceiling. Try to sink your shoulder blades into the mat and release any unnecessary tension in your upper shoulders and neck before applying any pressure into the straps.

1. Inhale and press your arms down to your hips.

2. Exhale and lift your arms back to the ceiling. Do 8–10 repetitions.

evaluation tips: Look out for rib-to-mat connection. This indicates the degree of tension in the middle back as well as the degree of ab connection in the front of the body.

modification: Raise Tabletop position to reduce lower-back strain.

advanced: Increase weight in feet by adding a prop or by extending legs to the ceiling.



frog

purpose: helps stabilize the hips and spine

setup: Lie on your back on the Reformer carriage with your feet in the straps in Pilates stance (heels together, toes apart). Keep your tailbone planted on the mat and your spine neutral. Press your arms firmly into the mat. Your hips should make a 45-degree angle to your pelvis.

1. Inhale and bend your knees into a plié.
2. Exhale and extend your legs back to start. Do 10 repetitions.

evaluation tips: Keep your heels firmly connected to each other. Feel the wrapping muscles engage in your legs. Encourage pelvic floor connection by squeezing your heels together firmly as though you're cracking open a nut. Heels that are sliding around each other indicate weak external rotators or lack of focus. If one heel presses forward from the other consistently, this indicates a dominance of one leg over the other. Both examples are easy to correct by simply paying closer attention to the simple connection of your heels to one another evenly.



modification: If knee or sacral instability exists, this can be performed in parallel with a prop (such as a yoga block), keeping the feet in line with the hips.

advanced: Add a Circle or a ball to further challenge the stabilizer muscles.

leg circles

purpose: maintain connection to mat while stabilizing neutral position of spine and pelvis

setup: Lie on your back on the Reformer carriage or Tower mat with your feet in the straps. Your body will

be in a neutral position as in Frog.

1. Inhale and squeezing your inner thighs together, raise your legs up to the ceiling as high as you can while keeping your tailbone planted on the mat.

2. Exhale and open your legs as wide as the machine and press them downward into a semicircle movement. Keep your legs in parallel to encourage control. Do 8 repetitions and then reverse.

evaluation tips: Choose degree of leg extension based on client's hamstring flexibility. If they're really tight, their leg will be bent. If they're more limber, their leg will be fully extended to the ceiling. Cue movement control through origin of hamstring. Watch for pelvic tilts and inconsistency in circle shape.

modification: Keep circles narrow and small. If hamstrings are very tight, lower the shape in space to allow the legs to be straight without locking the knees.

advanced: Allow the circle shape to turn out, but maintain this while traveling through the centerline. ●

