

Posture your Club to Prevent Age-Related Postural Changes



As our clients enter their middle ages, they are concerned about wrinkles, gray hair, and weight gain. Many of these are easily hidden with hair dye and Botox, but we can still see them aging. The way they stand and move gives it away. Think about the posture of the oldest person you know. It is inevitable that with the natural effects of aging, posture will change. Generally, the older adult experiences

strength and balance changes that directly affect their posture. This is a normal process of aging, but it can be slowed and even prevented by performing postural exercise, such as Pilates.

As we age, we lose speed of nerve transmission which directly affects our balance reactions. This loss of balance will cause an adult to walk with their legs further apart and to take fewer risks with their activities. Weakness will often result in the buttocks muscles due to the decreased amount of bending and squatting. And, stiffness will result in the joints – especially the hips, knees and ankles – due to the overall decrease in activity. So begins the spiraling course of events

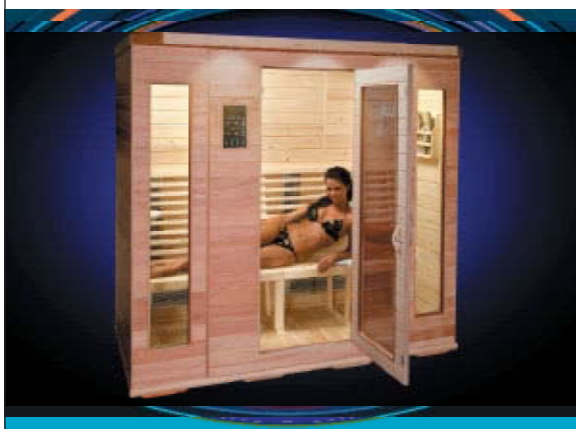
leading to the fragile older adult. Current research indicates that this decline can be slowed through regular balance and strengthening exercises.

The typical posture of an older adult includes: slightly flexed knees, slightly flexed hips, a forward-tilted pelvis, rounded shoulders, and a forward head. You can almost pick out an older person from their shadow. These changes are fairly normal in the process of aging, but they can be slowed and even prevented with regular posture and balance exercises.

You may know a few older adults like this. They dress nicely, dye their hair, exercise regularly, eat right, but they still look and move like an old person. The missing link for them is working directly on their posture and balance. This requires not only strengthening and stretching, but practice and re-education. Practicing Pilates covers not only the strengthening and stretching, but it is a constant rehearsal of proper posture and alignment that will become engrained in your client. Your clients will begin good posture out of pure habit, and it will feel natural after practicing it in their Pilates class. Pilates, in general, will be beneficial to healthy older adults. Specifically

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targeting postural changes will cause rapid improvement for them.

One of the first places that Pilates starts the improvement is with the breath. As we age, our ribcage becomes stiff, and this contributes to the kyphotic shape of the mid-back. Pilates-style breathing encourages the older adult to inhale into the ribcage – expanding to the back and the sides for mobilization. (Deep breathing is really the only way to create mobility for your adult clients here.) When exhaling, they imagine their ribs going into the front pockets of their pants and their navel drawing to their spine. This engages the deep abdominal muscles for core strengthening. Focusing the breath on the movement of the ribcage is not only good for posture, but it keeps older adults breathing deeply. I always tell clients that what isn't filled with air may become filled with fluid (pneumonia). Breath is one main principle of Pilates and it suits even the most fragile older adult.

The second target is the gluteals ,or buttocks muscles. The gluteus maximus becomes extremely weak in older adults causing difficulty with transferring from sit to stand; while also dramatically changing posture and balance. Gluteus muscles can be retrained with simple exercises, such as: Pilates posture, standing footwork, and bridging. By teaching Pilates posture, we get the older adult to practice using their gluteus muscles every time they stand. This is a constant reminder for them to fight the effects of aging.

A third postural change to target in the older adult is the forward head posture. This often develops as the older person begins to stand with flexed hips and knees, kind of giving in to gravity and rounding their spine and shoulders toward the floor. The eye gaze then falls to the floor as well. To correct this, the older adult tips the head up from just the very top of the cervical spine, and this results in the forward head posture, with very short sub occipital muscles and very long neck flexors. Pilates exercise helps to correct this posture by creating length in the back of the neck and continually cueing the adult to reach up through the top-back of the head while drawing the shoulders down. These verbal cues reinforce good cervical posture that will decrease stress on the spine and use mobility to its fullest.

The gentle nature and basic concepts of Pilates exercise make it the perfect method for helping to delay or even prevent age-related postural changes.

Many of the exercises require no equipment and can be done anywhere. Make your facility the place where your clients come to learn how they can take an active stance against the postural changes that come with aging. **CS**

Christine Romani-Ruby is a licensed Physical Therapist and the Founder of Phi Pilates, a corporation that trains fitness and rehabilitation in Pilates exercise. For a complete guide to Pilates postural exercises that require nothing but a mat, visit www.phipilates.com and look for the "Pilates Mat Manual" by Christine Romani-Ruby MPT, ATC.

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