

Pilates and Trauma

By Anna Hoopengardner

Our understanding of emotional trauma is still beginning. Only since 1980 has the American Psychiatric Association included a classification for post-traumatic stress disorder (*PTSD*), which defines the most severe side effects of trauma induced by war or violent crime. However, those with PTSD only represent a tiny fraction of those living with trauma. Unknown numbers of people are affected as the result of unresolved emotional betrayal, loss, illness, or even prolonged stress. Some people with unresolved trauma aren't even aware of it and are perhaps coping with their symptoms by taking pharmaceuticals prescribed for other disorders.

Because our culture does not encourage emotional vulnerability, we allow little time to fully acknowledge the depth of emotional events. The body is not encouraged to do much more than a mindless 30 minutes of cardio at least three times a week, and certainly not to express itself fully and with authenticity. This stifling of both emotional and physical expression becomes disastrous when coping with life's threatening events.

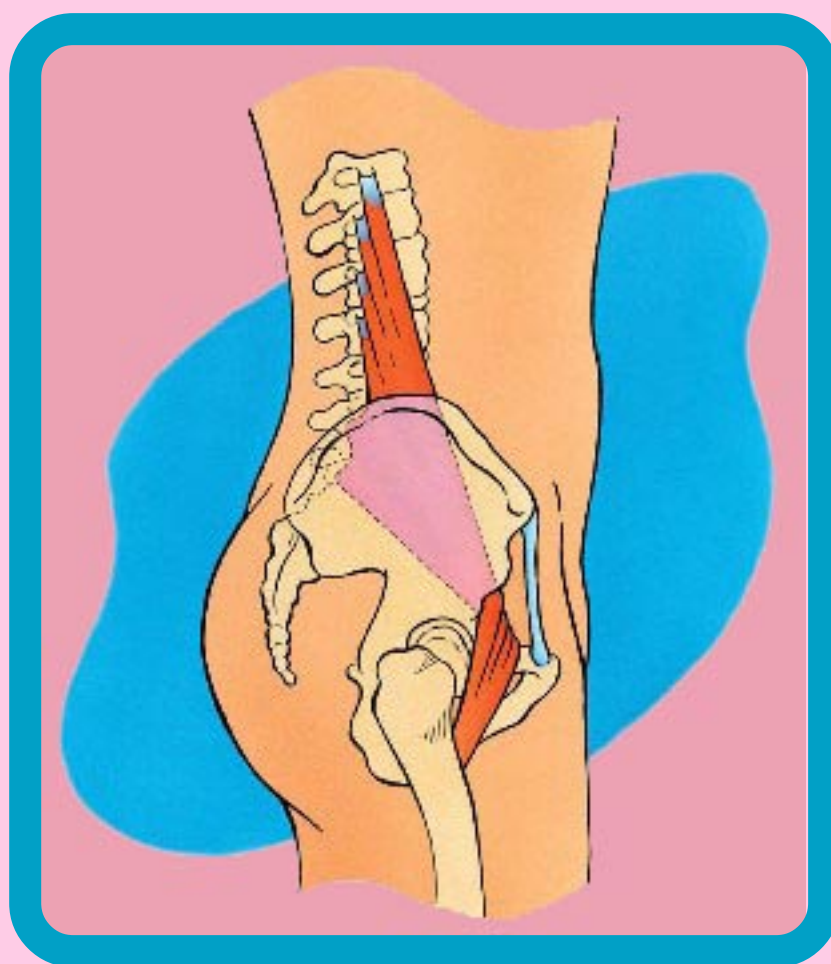
It is important to realize that trauma is not a given when encountering a highly emotional event, but it is an unfortunate by-product of not fully experiencing the full course of emotions and physical release required to process the event. In response to either emotional or physical threat, all animals execute biologically based, non-conscious action patterns that prepare them to meet it and defend themselves. It is actually when these defensive responses are overwhelmed or interrupted that trauma occurs rather than the threat itself. Trauma is an incomplete biological response to threat that becomes frozen in time and in bodies; a response to *activation, dissociation and freezing*.

Although it is disruptive and painful to live with unresolved trauma, there is always an opportunity for healing. The energy that has been disassociated from or frozen in the body, is actually begging to be retrieved and restored to normal functioning. One who lives with trauma knows the constant vague nagging caused by anxiety, depression, and the chronic pain and tension that makes it awful to be in ones own skin. These symptoms, although distressing, are the body's way of alerting you to the problem at hand and thus creating an opportunity for transformation and healing within oneself.

Candace B. Pert, PhD, acclaimed mind/body theorist and scientist, believes that the body is actually the "unconscious mind" a term so often used in Analytical Psychology. Because the unconscious is thought to be the royal road to transformation in this psychological tradition, the body, in Pert's opinion, is the bridge between the mind and spirit as well as the path to transformational healing and individuation. In her book *Molecules of Emotion*, she advocates passive bodywork such as energy work, shiatsu or deep tissue massage. However, I believe that Pilates and other alignment-based active therapy are a much more profound solution when dealing with the issue of trauma.

Pilates is active; meaning just by physical participation the client is taking responsibility for and acquiring the tools to heal. Pilates also promotes consciousness. In contrast to passive therapies, the client must be fully present to execute the exercises properly. The client is

given an opportunity to feel emotions and bodily sensations in a safe environment. The instructor, who is skilled in the subtler movement dysfunctions, uses the Pilates choreography as a template with which to bring awareness to the freedoms and limitations within the client's body. The instructor can then begin to ask questions about sensations or emotions with regards to experiencing one's freedoms and limitations, thus creating a dialog and initiating a process of bringing awareness. So the vague aching experienced in the hip, which caused pain all the way into the front of the abdomen and up into the opposite shoulder, is actually caused by the *Psoas* muscle which is spasmed and generally has what is called a "fear response." This is the first layer. The client may take this at face value or may ask herself, "What caused the *Psoas* to react in fear?" Was it the appendectomy? Was it the dichotomous experience of sexuality in terror and desire that caused her to freeze and dissociate? And where did this terror originate?



Much like an alchemist, the sufferer of trauma begins a metaphorical process of uncovering and discovery through the body. Pilates is the somatic method by which one's story is drawn up from unconsciousness, realized and then transformed. Pilates really has no particular goal in mind. It has definite by-products, such as a more integrated and healthy mind-body connection with benefits of strength and flexibility, but it also offers a profound and entirely

more balanced approach to living. Pilates recognizes that, like life, our practice is a process. It cannot be pinned down, and despite all of our efforts, it cannot be tamed. Its patterns can be noticed, named and recognized, but there is no landing point, no final destination. The skilled Pilates practitioner is not concerned with the rigid standards of choreography, but the conscious experience the client has while performing the choreography. The spine flexes at the lumbar and all of the abdominal muscles including the *Rectus abdominis*, *Transverse*, internal *Obliques*, and *Psoas* fire, the neck and shoulders stabilize and only then does the head float up into a hundreds preparation. The form is just a map by which the client can experience him or herself and measure the quality of that experience. Whether the client wishes to enhance the quality of this experience is a matter of choice. With this conscious experience of our own uniqueness and the stories that we all possess, we can gather up those missing and ignored pieces that we have lost or forgotten along the way and thus confront the consequences to the body in a safe and responsible way.

In this, we recognize the cause of our unconsciousness. While some may find a personal story, a particular trauma, a surgery, or pry further to find a particular attitude or maladapted emotional pattern at work, others may look even deeper and recognize that there is a much greater force at work. This might be a negative inertia that is causing destruction of the earth and its natural resources, taking away our quality of life, health and vitality, freedom and consciousness. We have fooled ourselves into thinking that life is solid, indefinite, and that there is a destination or goal to be met. Whole lives have been oriented around this false belief. We get on the treadmill and plug in the headset, then get on the floor and grimace through 500 mindless “crunches,” which are lead by the head, not by the abs, and are damaging to the spinal cord.

As in the body, the external symptoms are merely humanity’s way of alerting itself that there is a problem, thus creating an opportunity for deep transformation and healing. In our humanity, we are blessed with both a gift and a burden. It’s up to us to decide...

Anna Hoopengardner was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area. In her late teens and early twenties she was equally involved in athletics and the arts; mainly opera, theatre and long distance running. Anna discovered Pilates in 2000 after an accident that threw her body into a state of chronic dysfunction. She abandoned her physical pursuits due to pain. She tried chiropractic care, yoga and strength training yet there was little change. Within three months of beginning one-on-one Pilates training she was able to return to athletics. Anna was certified through the PhysicalMind Institute in Mat and Apparatus and has been teaching Pilates for 4 years. She specializes in injury rehabilitation, chronic low back and knee pain, body sculpting and provides a fun and challenging workout for those trying to reach peak performance while maintaining optimal strength and flexibility, as well as for those with problem areas and chronic pain. She is also involved in the performing arts in the San Francisco Bay area and is currently recording an album.