

Close your eyes and tune in to a better life with Pilates

By Carol Westmorland



IN TEN sessions you will feel the difference, in 20 you will see the difference and in 30 you will have a whole new body, said Joseph Pilates.

How true. I really believe in Pilates. It is the best thing I have ever done to my body.

Now into its 80th year, Pilate's is all about strengthening the muscle then stretching it. It's not complicated or extreme. Nothing is required except a small amount of space, a mat and a simple wish to do something for yourself.

Gravity supplies the body with its own resistance when you are on the mat with comparatively few repetitions. The movements look so easy.

That is the point. We favour the big muscle groups and forget to use the smaller muscles, the ones that hold our posture together. They forget their job. It's those little muscles that Pilates wakes up.

Physical fitness is the first requisite for happiness, was another important statement from Joseph Pilates.

Whatever time of day you take Pilates, it restores equilibrium, leaving you with a calm energy. Who isn't looking for a leaner, suppler, more toned body and a calmer, more relaxed mind?

Pilates promotes body awareness. The body can respond in the most extraordinary way to this form of movement. With wide-ranging needs and expectations most people could do with being more conscious of how dependent they are on their



Relaxing: Carol Westmorland demonstrates one of the stretching exercises. Physical fitness is the first requisite for happiness, said Joseph Pilates.

remarkable bodies. People are generally unaware of imbalances in their body structure. For me, it is exciting to see someone transform with improved strength, mobility, agility and confidence.

Try sitting on a chair in a slumped position and think: "I feel great. I am looking forward to a brilliant day."

Notice the discrepancy between your posture and your thoughts. Now reposition yourself in a vibrant, upright, sitting position

and think: "I feel miserable." Do your thoughts match your posture? No they don't.

In a good posture, it is more difficult, albeit not impossible, to have negative thoughts. Great posture sends all the right signals. Confidence attracts. Simple awareness can, on a day to day basis, work wonders.

Take that chair-back away. Does your body collapse? Now look around you. Notice the slumped posture of many, those who carry their bodies around like a weight.

Notice the few who bounce along, head held high. I know which type of person you will see more of. We send out powerful signals with our posture, so becoming aware of how we are perceived by others is getting half-way there.

The Pilates approach is mindful and intelligent. You will be asked to increase your ability to listen to your body. Through years of teaching I have found that some people are tremendously attached to their physical and mental

tension. It has become so familiar that it seems essential to their identities.

A positive outlook and willingness will go a long way towards change. The changes need to become sub-conscious and reactive to the influence of our everyday surroundings. The right environment for Pilates is relaxed and not at all competitive.

IT SHOULD encourage individual understanding. Initially it is not easy to listen to your body. Slowing down and actually taking time to understand may sound easy but for many it is quite an adjustment. We don't often allow our thoughts to slow down.

I encourage my classes to close their eyes and 'tune in' to their movements. No-one needs to be self-conscious and mirrors are definitely not allowed. You just bring yourself, wearing comfortable clothing. No shoes are required.

Try Pilates and see for yourself. You will wonder why it took so long for you to find it. Pilates is very special. You may ask who can benefit from Pilates. That's easy - everyone.

■ Carol is a qualified Pilates instructor who holds classes throughout the week. Further information from www.pilates-cumbria.co.uk

■ Carol Westmorland is also a champion cyclist who tries to ride every day for at least two hours.

She holds the 2004 National 12-hour Championship with 243.19 miles and the 2006 National 24-hour Championship with 445.41 miles. Her personal best for 10 miles is 23 minutes 18 seconds. Her best racing terrain is hilly.

A daily walk will keep you fit and help you to chill out

DID YOU know that walking regularly could reduce the chances of you catching a cold?

For years, doctors, psychiatrists and now government departments have been extolling the virtues of walking as a therapy for both injured bodies and troubled minds.

A daily walk has been linked to cutting the risk of osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes and cancer. A study at the University of Massachusetts recently discovered that, of 550 subjects, those who walked every day had 25 per cent fewer colds than their less active counterparts.

Another American study compared the effects of a walking

Guidebook writer Vivienne Crow shares her love of the great outdoors



programme over a toning and stretching regime in elderly subjects and found that the walkers performed far better in tests of mental agility. As an aerobic exercise, walking increases oxygen and blood flow to the brain, helping it to work more efficiently.

Our own Department of Health is determined to get a third of all people in England walking at least 1,000 more steps daily by 2012.

Now, of course it's easy to scoff and regard this all as simply

more nonsense from the so-called experts - another health fad that will fade in time - but anyone who walks regularly will have experienced at least the short-term benefits of walking.

A recently bereaved friend of mine told me last week she'd spent the first seven miles of a 10-mile walk through the woods near her home bawling her eyes out.

After having felt low for several days, she arrived home physically exhausted but her mood had lifted considerably.

I find that few things give me the same sense of empowerment and liberation as a challenging walk on the fells. To feel the rock under my hands on a steep,

craggy ridge and then reach the top under my own steam is a wonderful feeling - and such a simple thing; no great skills or financial outlay required.

If I'm feeling troubled or simply need time to think through something that's been causing me stress, I head for my favourite group of fells and walk it out.

The space, the exercise and the solitude all enable me to think more clearly.

I discover all kinds of things going on inside my head. Mostly it's rubbish, but once I've sifted through it in the fresh air, it's easier to get it into perspective or find ways to articulate it.

For some reason, the natural landscape helps us put our

problems into perspective. Maybe it's because, surrounded by the sheer scale of Mother Nature, we gain an insight into our true place in the world.

It's hard to see how your boss's irritating, patronising ways matter in the grand scheme of things when you're standing on top of a mountain looking down on a sparkling lake with nothing but the occasional cloud for company. Others might say it's because we are closer to God, the Creator.

Whatever the case, I know I'd recommend a regular dose of walking for just about anyone.

■ Vivienne Crow is a freelance writer specialising in outdoor pursuits.