

Take all of the pain away and get BACK to life again

By Carol Westmorland champion cyclist and Pilates instructor



Only a brave person would dismiss the debilitating effect back problems can have on an individual.

It can bring even the sturdiest to their knees – rendering the person virtually incapable of movement and, of course, off work which, in our current economic climate, is not good news for industry and commerce.

Nevertheless it is often the case that it becomes a compromised way of life for many with so called episodes endured long term.

Fortunately progress is now being made with many organisations looking carefully at this and taking the necessary action. Pre-emptive help is time and effort well spent.

My experience, now spanning over a decade, tells me that for those susceptible to back pain by far the best advice is to take matters into their own hands. Being 'fixed' sporadically is not the answer; it is about understanding your plight, managing it accepting a new way of life. An approach that can perhaps take some courage.

Recently, I wrote about men and Pilates and received such a positive response I want to elaborate. To believe that Pilates is only the domain of the female is to miss its point. After all, its founder Joseph Pilates was a man who didn't have a feminine side to him at all and without question

was someone who had no time for anyone who complained about their suffering without doing something about it. He actively encouraged self-help and believed his method was mindful approach to movement.

Craig's story is testament to Pilates. I, like him, believe Pilates changes lives. Without question in life you get back what you put in. Craig may well inspire the doubters out there. He has conquered his back problem with self belief and determination.

Some seven years ago I received a telephone call from one of my regular clients who explained that a male colleague was suffering with recurrent back problems, often rendering him unable to leave his home and disrupting his career, confidence and well being. She, having found Pilates helped her back following pregnancy, felt sure that her colleague Craig would find Pilates the answer.

By timely coincidence, and



having relied on regular quick fixes, Craig by this point in despair, found himself under the guidance of a hospital physiotherapist who told it as it was. By clearly explaining to him his problem,

using x-ray results, Craig had

something tangible to work with.

The results showed

severe wear

and tear to a

disc at the

base of his

spine. This was

due to lack of

exercise, being

tall, bad posture,

and having a job

where he spent

long days in an

office chair. With a

big dollop of resilience

Craig saw this diagnosis

as an opportunity to act.

The words of his hospital

physiotherapist was music

to his ears so when she

suggested Pilates Craig was

extremely receptive.

It must be remembered that

all those years ago Pilates was

by no means mainstream –

unlike today. Craig, not

having heard of it, was

understandably quizzical.

However, he had reached a

point whereby having

had a diagnosis and,

with complete trust in

his physiotherapist,

he felt confident

enough to try it.

appreciating that

Pilates is not

something you can 'dip into', he prepared himself for the long haul. By his own testimony, his first classes weren't easy – not helped by the fact that he was the only man there. A trend I am pleased to say has changed over the years. However, with dogged perseverance, and after being initially dismayed by how unfit he felt he took comfort in the fact that people of all ages, shapes and sizes were in the same boat. During his transition his body quite literally creaked.

As Craig quickly realised, Pilates is a series of exercises that you can do at your own level. Many of the movements can be taken forward a stage at a time, depending on just how you feel on the day. There is no pressure to compete and, aside from some gentle mickey-taking, you have no reason to feel you are letting yourself down by staying within your boundaries at a level that feels comfortable. You can move on as and when you feel ready, willing and able. Now, at 39, he wouldn't say that he is super fit – some would disagree – nor is he, in his words, "in possession of a fine six pack", but he is very aware of this: his posture is better, he feels good about himself and, most importantly, in the seven years he has been going to Pilates classes, has never had a repeat of the painful episodes mentioned earlier.

So, if you have back problems, or even if you haven't, and just want to improve your posture, relax and stretch those muscles after a hard day at work or home, he would recommend that you get down to your local Pilates class.

You never know, it might just change your life.

If you pass me on the fells please say hello, even if you're a man!

WITH the thaw almost complete now there are a lot more people out and about on the hills – and, after months of hardly seeing a soul when I've been out walking, I've now got lots of kindred spirits to chat with. Total strangers, of course, but mostly people with whom I have something in common – a love of hill walking.

And the topics of conversation? Well, there's the weather, of course, the hills, aching joints, work, family – and sometimes even quite personal subjects.

Only the other day I ended up walking with a retired gentleman who admitted to me that this was his last chance to be out on the hills before a major operation. He was extremely worried about the operation, and his chances not only

Guidebook writer Vivienne Crow shares her love of the great outdoors



of leading a normal life afterwards but simply of survival, so this walk was his way of saying goodbye to his beloved hills – just in case.

Individuals often like to share confidences with strangers – people who don't have preconceived ideas about them and who they are unlikely ever to see again. And, being out on the hills, freed from the constraints of everyday life and seeing things from a wider perspective, often encourages people to 'open up'.

Anyway, this conversation reminded me of a thread I'd read

on an outdoors website forum a few years ago.

A walking guide writer was seeking feedback on the advice that he was planning to put in a new book. The advice related to lone women walkers but was aimed at men.

He suggested they keep a "considerable distance" between themselves and lone females to avoid being perceived as stalkers.

He also said: "Small courtesies that would be agreeable in a town should be avoided to prevent the woman feeling any obligation towards you." So, no holding gates open, he suggested.

And... "When you meet a woman, greet her pleasantly but neither engage her in conversation nor look back when

you have passed her."

I was horrified! Is our society so encased in fear that we can no longer be pleasant to each other? Surely such paranoia simply feeds fear? Of course, we all need to be aware of our surroundings and trust our instincts when we meet strangers but, as one of the respondents on the forum quite rightly said, his ideas were "alarmist".

I'm sure the writer had good intentions but he clearly hadn't given enough thought to the implications of his advice.

I had an image, no more cheery greetings or comments on the weather. And definitely no chance of trading small intimacies.

I can only hope the so-called 'advice' never made it into print.

