

How I Found My Way Out: the Pilates Way to Respiratory Health

Share   



By Darien Gold

One morning in 2004, I woke up with a fever, chills and a sore throat. I assumed I caught the flu and that if I rested and took care of myself in a couple of weeks I'd be well. I canceled my teaching and used many of the home remedies health practitioners recommended. They didn't work. By week two, I wasn't feeling any better, and what scared me was I couldn't take a full breath. Before this experience, I had my clients focus on the breath regularly telling them to expand and contract their lungs. But what did I actually mean to expand and contract the lungs? Was it even possible if the lungs were compromised? I didn't know and felt ashamed at my ignorance. I tucked away that revelation as it was time to see my doctor.

It took me three weeks to get an appointment. All of my symptoms were gone; however, I still couldn't fully inhale. My doctor listened to my lungs and told me I had developed a secondary infection and there wasn't much I could do except rest. But, I can't take a full breath I said, so he prescribed an inhaler. Appointment over, come back in two weeks.

Wow, I thought, it's true. Some doctors really don't care. Discouraged, I drove home feeling alone and scared. I lived in a one-bedroom apartment with two demanding cats, but I ignored them and dragged myself to an unmade bed, hoping they would forgive me. Actually, my cats must have known I wasn't well because they snuggled quite close to me, not caring I hadn't said hello nor filled up their cat dishes.

Because the doctor said I was no longer contagious, I braved the Los Angeles traffic, allowing extra time as I needed to move slowly and to pace myself. Climbing the stairs to my studio, setting up for clients, returning vendors' calls — all exhausted me. The normal seven hours of teaching and running my studio now depleted my energy and made me long for my bed. I knew I was pale and that I'd lost weight, but if my students noticed, they didn't say anything. For the next couple of months, I followed a simple routine: I'd wake, usually in a fog, have a light breakfast, use my inhaler, drive to my studio, teach, drive home and return to bed. This was my life as I tried to figure out why my respiratory system wasn't improving.

Though the doctor lacked concern, he was right about my needing to rest because at last, my mind started to clear and one powerful thought cut through the flu fog.

Why couldn't I use my own practice to heal myself? It seemed so obvious!



I imagined a client coming to me in a weakened state with respiratory problems. What parts of the Pilates system would be most helpful for this client? Well, then, why not be my own client? I felt both relieved and hopeful and as I committed to a few minutes on the Reformer after work as well as returning to my studio on days I didn't teach. Somehow the Reformer felt like the right place to begin my re-entry into the land of the living. My nervous system was fragile, and I'd tremble after only a few minutes of exercising. But I was determined to practice what I preached, and incrementally those few arduous minutes grew into 10, then 15, and then 20 minutes of non-stop movement. I encouraged my imaginary client, who was me, to remain focused on the breath. By the third week, I had a breakthrough — my trembling disappeared, and my lungs began to open. No inhaler could have competed with the power of those Pilates exercises.

As the weeks turned into months, I kept up my practice and eventually, was able to get through an entire hour workout. I felt stronger than before I got sick and the memories of how I recovered have continued to help guide me. My firsthand experience led me to feel a renewed sense of gratitude and appreciation. I couldn't have imagined an illness keeping me hostage for so long would reinforce what I'd always known — Pilates heals.



In closing, I have a few tips for any instructor working with a client who is dealing with a respiratory issue:

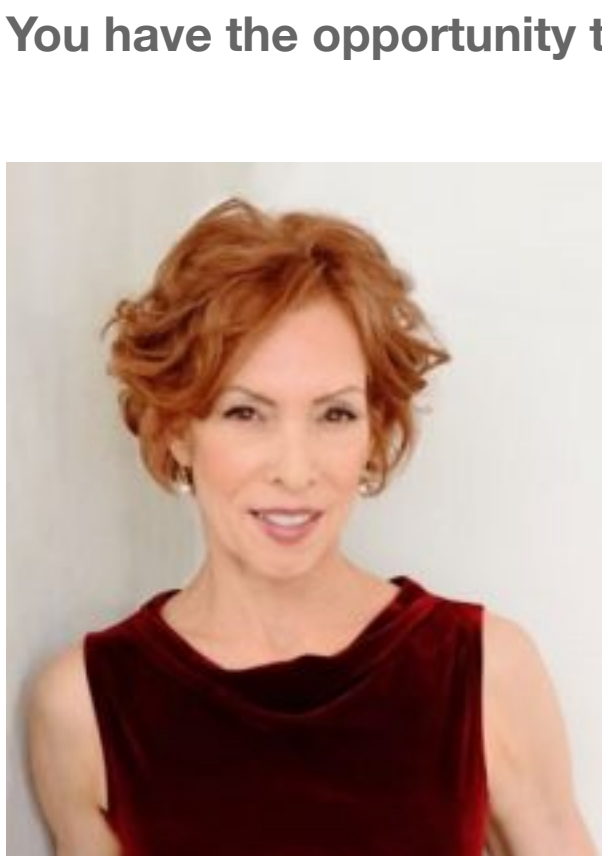
1. **Know and trust the body's desire is to return to homeostasis.** Please have your client focus solely on the breath. Your actual cues are secondary to the client's ability to understand that the breath moves the body.
2. **Start as a beginner.** Because the Reformer seemed the logical place for my own healing, I approached the Reformer like a beginner, not an advanced practitioner who concentrated on refining rhythm and technique. I had to set aside my decades of training and make the mental adjustment necessary for the first step in the healing process.
I began with Footwork as we usually do, but I used each foot position as a way to reconnect to my intention — to increase my lung capacity. As I placed my feet in the various positions, I pushed the carriage away from the foot bar, slowly enough to inhale until my legs were fully extended, even though my lungs still felt stuck. After I extended my legs, I returned the carriage "home" slowly so I could fully exhale. Although I was moving in slow motion, it made sense to me because I kept thinking about my imaginary client to whom I'd also give kindness and specific directions. In essence, Footwork became my breathing barometer. I then attempted some of the exercises in both the Basic and Intermediate repertoires. **My main goal was to monitor my breath — did each exercise open my lungs or not? Or was I forcing an exercise and cutting off my breath?**
3. **Start in a supine position.** I recommend having your client begin the sessions on his/her back so the spine and especially, the ribs can soften and release any tension. Whatever equipment you choose, limit the time there to ten or fifteen minutes as the body will fatigue quickly. Depending on the exercise, experiment with the number of springs.
Listening and exploring with a variety of exercises will be as unique as the client and depend on the client's awareness and proprioceptive capabilities. Keep your client focused on the breath — I can't emphasize this enough — and readjust if she/he cannot find the breath in a particular exercise. Be prepared for a slow recovery. If you're methodical, consistent, and encouraging, your client will become your biggest fan!

I've learned a lot since 2004, and though I still advise starting with the Reformer to establish a baseline, I now take the client to the Cadillac for assisted stretches.

Your client will be weak and vulnerable, so be patient.

Be deliberate.

You have the opportunity to be a fabulous healing conduit.



For more information about Darien Gold, you might check out the March/April 2020 print and digital issue of Pilates Style magazine. Darien's forty-year journey from the gymnastics mat to the Pilates mat is the featured story, Voice of Pilates, and found in the section, Masters of the Method, Powerhouse. You can also listen to Darien's live weekly radio show, "All Things Pilates" on KPCA.FM and local radio, 103.3FM or her bi-monthly podcast, ALL THINGS PILATES on Apple Podcast, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. Learn from some of the top Pilates experts as well as lesser known experts — all who are making an impact on our fascinating industry.


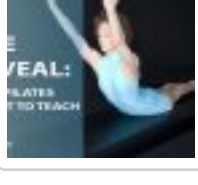
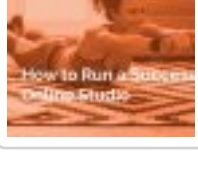
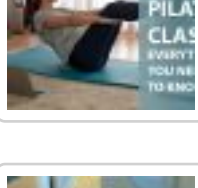
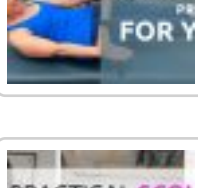
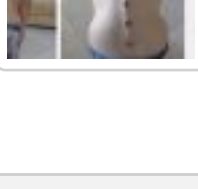
To contact Darien, she can be reached at <https://www.dariengold.com>

Share   



Find Pilates Teachers Near You

Recent Posts

-  [How I Found My Way Out: the Pilates Way to Respiratory Health](#)
-  [The Reveal: Best Pilates Client to Teach](#)
-  [How to Run a Successful Online Studio](#)
-  [How to Teach Virtual Pilates Sessions/ Online Fitness Classes: Everything you need to know](#)
-  [6 Tips on Finding that Pilates Mentor or Pilates Bridging Program for you!](#)
-  [Practical Scoliosis Assessment and Exercises with Erin Myers](#)

Categories

- Business of Pilates
- Community Articles
- Going More Joe
- Instructor Tidbits
- Interviews (PRO)
- Online Marketing
- Pilates
- Pilates for Special Conditions
- Pilates Living
- Pilates Video
- Pilates Workouts
- Research and Education
- Studio Feature

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

☐ Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.