Improve Your Strength and Balance With Pilates for MS

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Trying Pilates for MS

I've written many articles and blog posts about the benefits of exercise for multiple sclerosis (MS), but it occurred to me recently that I don't actually practice what I preach! I talk the talk but always find excuses not to walk the walk (or stagger the stagger in my case).

I worry about exercise making fatigue worse and being unable to meet all my daily commitments like work and taking care of my children. I also worry about how much I can physically do due to my disabilities.

How can I join an exercise class, for example, when I can't walk well or stand for long periods? How can I go swimming when heat intolerance makes getting dressed again impossible?

I needed to find something I could do at home on my own terms and at my own pace, so I started to make enquiries about private Pilates lessons.

I'd been talking to a friend with MS a few months ago who'd done a six-week course of Pilates and the results were amazing. She'd managed to get rid of her walking stick as her strength and balance had improved so much. I figured I might be able to improve and either get rid of one of my sticks or at least improve my confidence with two.

The Problem With Classes

I used to go to Pilates classes at my local MS treatment centre but found being part of a large class wasn't particularly helpful. I tended to lie at the back and do as little as possible when the teacher wasn't looking. Even when she caught me snoozing and forced me to do it correctly, it was never enough to make any real difference.

It was also difficult to get on the floor and back up again, so I felt self-conscious being in a class full of disabled people but the only one who couldn't do it properly. This didn't do a lot for my self-esteem and I found myself skipping classes and eventually quitting altogether.

This is why it was important to find a teacher who'd come to me. That way I couldn't hide at the back and all the exercises would focus on what my needs were.

My friend recommended an instructor and we hit it off immediately. She's had lots of experience working with MSers so she understood fatigue and the need to take it at my pace. She gave me a plan of exercises I can do on my own between sessions and the results have been good so far.

Benefits

I can get down on the floor and back up again much more easily than before, which is a great improvement. This

has improved my confidence as I worry less about falling now I know I can get up again more easily.

I feel stronger and my stamina has improved. I didn't think I'd have the energy to do the exercises every day and worried that the exertion would leave me exhausted but I haven't found this to be the case. The effort is improving my fatigue rather than adding to it and this motivates me to continue.

My bladder and bowel function have improved dramatically! This must have something to do with strengthening my pelvic floor as I find I can hold it when I need to go and don't need to go so often. I have been crippled by constipation in the past and find this has virtually disappeared since doing Pilates. Who knew!

My feet are better and my foot drop has improved, as well. Getting in and out of bed is easier and everyday tasks feel a little bit easier to do than before.

Cost

It's been so helpful, but I do struggle with motivation some days as the inevitable fatigue kicks in and life gets in the way. I'd love it if the instructor could come every morning and motivate me, but her time costs money so I need to take this into consideration.

A session of around 90 minutes costs me £60, which is around $90 US, so it's not cheap. I invested in six lessons, 5 of which I've done, but can't afford to have more than that.

She's been brilliant and suggested I have top-up sessions every six weeks or so to keep me on track and make sure I'm doing it properly. I may even go back to the class at the MS treatment centre now I feel more confident but will see how I get on.

One of the main benefits for me is feeling like I'm doing something positive to improve my disability. It won't improve by itself, and even if I don't make dramatic improvements at least I'm giving myself the best chance of fighting back.