

LIVE FROM THE CENTER

This routine, which is perfect for beginners, will help you take one of Joe's most important principles center stage.

workout by Risa Sheppard



The 6 Pilates Principles: Coordination, Control, Centering, Precision, Flow, Breath

I start all of my lessons the same way. Whether the client is an advanced Pilates student, an athlete, a soccer mom or injured, the session always begins with the introduction of the body's "center."

The center is the point from which all movement flows. Long before we heard of the "core," there was the center, which Joe Pilates himself talked about. To understand where your center lies, visualize dropping a stone in water. Imagine the vibration that emanates from it into the far reaches of the water.

I prefer to think of Pilates as a movement discipline rather than an exercise routine. We do not want it to become too mechanical or robotic. Just like no two fingerprints are identical, no two bodies are the same. We want to always instill our uniqueness in our movement.

This is why I have devised this sequence of movements, perfect for everyone from beginners to advanced students, to use as a way to address Pilates and all other forms of physical discipline. It is the foundation of

movement. We can't build a house without a solid foundation; otherwise the walls would not stand tall and strong.

Use your body's center and be mindful when engaging in all activities, whether you're in mat class or just walking down the street. This will not only strengthen your abdominals and lower back, but it will keep your body and mind in alignment. You will look and feel more confident and powerful, and best of all, you will possess all the ingredients of Joseph Pilates's six principles. **PS**

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Finding Your Center



PURPOSE: improves alignment of the entire body; establishes the point of power for all movements, both mentally and physically

SETUP: Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart and placed evenly on the floor. Place your right hand on your abdominals and your left hand on your lower back.

1. Imagine that you have magnets placed at your ankles, calves and knees, and pull your muscles inward. As you visualize your body, pull your navel into your spine.
2. Make as much space as possible between your pelvis and rib cage by elongating your waist. Lengthen from your center and extend all of the surrounding muscles to help you stand as tall as possible. I call this the "declumping" factor.
3. Widen your sternum, imagining that warm oil is being massaged down your shoulders. Continue to visualize the magnets between your legs so you are constantly engaging all of your muscles.
4. Elongate your spine, imagining that your spine does not end at your neck, but continues out of the top of your head and up to the sky.
5. Imagine that one laser beam extends from one end of your hips to the other, and another from about an inch below your belly button to about an inch above your tailbone.
6. Now, imagine that where those points meet, there is a small ping pong ball with the energy of the sun extending out of itself. This is your body's center, from which all movement flows.

TIP: Think of the center as the hub of a wheel from which all spokes are strong.



Lifting Arms from the Center



PURPOSE: strengthens the abdominals and back; creates more flowing and stronger movements

SETUP: After you have found your center, stand tall with your arms by your sides.

1. Using the air as resistance, inhale and begin to lift your arms out to your sides from your center, lowering your shoulder blades as you lift your arms. Think of extending beyond your fingertips.
2. Exhale as you lower your arms, extending your fingers out as far as you can. Do 3 repetitions.

TIPS: Feel your shoulder blades engage. Imagine that your arms start at your center, not at your shoulders.





Arms Above Head



PURPOSE: strengthens the abdominals and back
SETUP: Lie on the floor with your knees bent, feet parallel and flat on the floor, legs slightly apart. Your arms are extended long at your sides a few inches above the floor, palms facing down and fingertips together. Make sure your shoulders are pulled away from your ears.

1. Using the air as resistance, lift your arms toward the ceiling.
2. Gently press your arms back down by your sides. Do 3–5 repetitions.

TIPS: Keep your spine imprinted on the floor throughout, and feel as though it is the center which lowers the arms. Extend your arms out from your shoulders, and extend your fingers long beyond your feet.

MODIFICATION: If you have trouble keeping your knees steady, place a pillow between your knees and squeeze it.

Leg Extension



PURPOSE: teaches us to extend the legs and lengthen them from the center to create a beautiful, strong line; works the abdominals and lower back

SETUP: Lie on the floor with your knees bent and together, feet parallel and flat on the floor. Place your fingers on top of your knees and lift your head and shoulders off the floor.

1. Inhale as you slowly, using the air as resistance, extend your legs straight from your knees out to a 45 degree angle, keeping your abdominals pulled into your spine to prevent arching your back.
2. Exhale as you return to start. Do 8 repetitions.

TIPS: Keep your shoulders away from your ears, and your knees squeezing together.



MODIFICATION: If this is too hard on your neck, keep your neck and shoulders down.

ADVANCED: Keeping your legs straight, lower and lift your legs 3 times.



Hundred Prep



PURPOSE: teaches us to lift the upper body, shoulders and neck from the center; decreases neck and shoulder tension; puts all power and strength in the abdominals
SETUP: Same as Arms Above Head.

1. Repeat previous exercise as you lift your head and shoulders off the mat. Do 3–8 repetitions.

TIPS: Do not lift from the neck—the lift comes from the center. Keep your abdominals flat and your naval to your spine.

MODIFICATION: If your neck hurts, keep your head down.

Sheppard Swoop



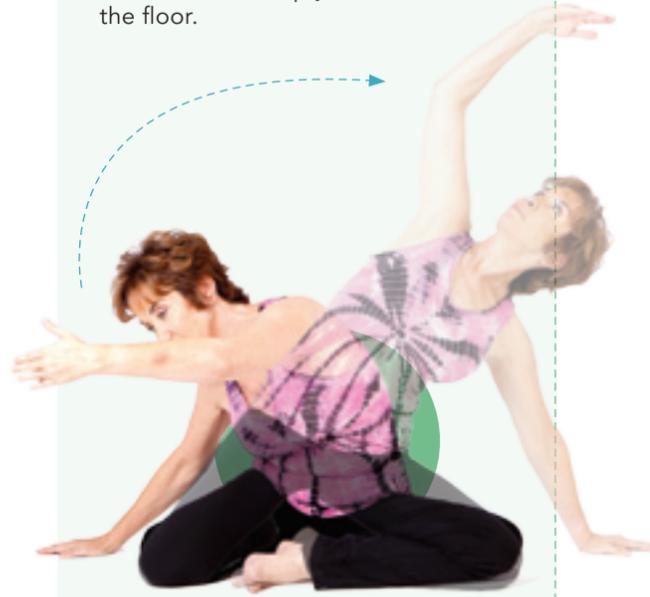
PURPOSE: encourages rotational spinal movement; works the waist; promotes upper-body mobility

SETUP: Get into a Mermaid position on your left side: Sit tall on your hips with your left knee bent in front of your body and your left heel aligned with your pelvis. Place your right heel behind your right hip, knee bent. Extend your left arm straight up toward the ceiling, and place your right hand by your right side, palm flat on the floor. Make sure your hips are aligned and facing forward. Keep as much space between your rib cage and pelvis as possible.

1. Start to rotate your torso to your right side, swooping your left arm across the floor and then in front of your body at chest height.
2. Return your left palm to the floor beside you, and swoop your right arm around toward your left side as you lift your buttocks off the floor, keeping your gaze focused on your right palm. Slowly reverse the movement and come back to center. Do 3 repetitions. Repeat on your other side.

TIPS: Feel your body move through space in a controlled manner. Do not be concerned how high your body lifts, but simply move from your center and allow the body to flow.

MODIFICATION: Just move from the torso and keep your buttocks on the floor.



Waist Lengthener



PURPOSE: elongates the waist; stretches the spine
SETUP: Get on your knees on the floor with your legs squeezing together and arms by your sides.

1. Lift your arms overhead with your elbows slightly bent, keeping equal distance on both sides between your ear and arm and your shoulder blades pressed down and aligned.
2. From your waist, bend to your left side until your hip almost touches the floor, keeping your knees bent throughout. Before your hip touches the floor, lift your body from your waist, returning to the starting position. Make sure to keep your arms in a slightly bent position by the sides of your head.
3. Take a breath and repeat on your other side. Do 3–6 repetitions on each side, alternating sides.

TIPS: Keep your arms by your ears. If you must place your hip on the floor, try not to sit there for a long time, and use your center, not momentum, to help you lift back up.

MODIFICATION: If your knees are bothering you, place a thick mat or some padding underneath them.



Tendon Stretch



PURPOSE: stretches the back of the legs and lower back; increases balance and centering

SETUP: Sit on the floor with your knees bent and together, heels on the floor as close to your buttocks as possible. Your arms are extended straight and hugging your knees, fingers resting on the soles of your feet.

1. Extend your right leg out in front of your body as far as you can while keeping your right arm straight and maintaining a straight line between your foot and shoulder. (You can bend your knee slightly if need be.)

2. Bring or stretch your knee as close to your face as possible without bending your knee, keeping your shoulders pressed down.

3. Lift from your center as you extend your right leg straight out in front of you again, then release to the starting position. Do 3–6 repetitions, each time stretching your leg closer toward your face. Repeat on your other leg.

TIPS: Keep your abdominals pulled into your spine and both shoulders even. Breathe evenly and deeply.

MODIFICATION: If you cannot reach your feet, place your hands around ankles or higher.



Extension Shoulder Lift



PURPOSE: strengthens the back, shoulders and upper body; helps to improve posture

SETUP: Lie on your stomach with your body long and straight, feet pointed and either together of a few inches apart. Press your pelvis into the floor. Stack your hands in front of your body, elbows bent wide to your sides, and place your forehead on top of your hands.

1. Gently lift your head, shoulders and elbows off the floor, keeping your forehead touching your hands. You will only come up a little bit. Hold for 3 counts, then lower back to the starting position. Do 3–6 repetitions.

TIPS: Think of lifting from the shoulder blades. Keep your neck elongated, and do not “break” at the neck. Imagine that your spine is elongating past the top of your head.

Cat Stretch: Rounded Back



PURPOSE: promotes a flexible, articulate and strong spine; increases flexibility of the lower back

SETUP: Get on all fours with your back flat like a tabletop, knees directly under your hips and arms under your shoulders.

1. Contract your center and round your spine toward the ceiling. Return to the starting position. Do 3–5 repetitions.

TIPS: Imagine that there is a curved line from the top of your head to your tailbone. Keep your shoulders pressed away from your ears.



Cat Stretch: Straight



PURPOSE: teaches us to change the position of the spine (from flexed to straight) with ease and grace while articulating the vertebrae

SETUP: Same as above.

1. Slowly and with control, straighten and lengthen your spine from your center until you feel a straight line from the top of your head to your tailbone. Return to the starting position. Do 3 repetitions.

TIPS: Do not allow your neck to arch above your shoulders.



Cat Stretch: Arched



PURPOSE: teaches us to change the position of the spine from straight to flexed; increases mobility of the vertebrae; releases back tension and strain

SETUP: Same as above.

1. Arch your back by lifting your tailbone and the crown of your head toward the sky without hunching your shoulders. Make sure to keep the movement even and flowing from your center. Return to the starting position. Do 3–6 repetitions, or more if it feels good.

TIPS: Remember that you are as young as your spine is flexible! Keep your spine articulate, strong and flexible. Allow it to move in all directions and keep it flowing from your center.



Still not feeling centered?

Don't miss Risa's new mat classes on www.PilatesAnytime.com!

Los Angeles native Risa Sheppard is the creator of the Sheppard Method Pilates, a unique blending of the body, mind and spirit. One of the first to teach Pilates, she received her formal training in the early 1970s under the tutelage of legendary master instructor Ron Fletcher in Beverly Hills, where she taught for five years. Risa has appeared on numerous television shows, including Shoppers Television Network and KTLA Morning Show, and she was the co-host of The Jack LaLanne Show. Additionally, she has been profiled on Entertainment

Tonight, KABC, KCBS and KTTV News. Risa is the author of Risa Sheppard's Fitness Formula for a Firm and Flat Stomach (Multi Fit Publications, 1987) and has appeared in such magazines as Vogue, Elle and Ladies' Home Journal, to name a few. Risa is the inventor of the Wheel of Fitness, now known as the Ring Flex, which is sold nationwide via Balanced Body. For more information, or to snag a copy of her Pilates! A Gentle Formula to a Strong Body DVD (Sheppard Method, 2010), visit www.sheppardmethod.com.