



A Search For Balance: *Pilates For Scoliosis*

by Lisa Ortega Robertson

"Scoliosis is a complicated deformity that is characterized by a lateral curvature and vertebral rotation. On the concave side of the curve, the ribs approximate and on the convex side they are widely separated. As the vertebral bodies rotate, the spinous processes deviate toward the concave side and the ribs follow the rotation of the vertebrae. The posterior ribs on the convex side are pushed posteriorly causing the characteristic rib hump seen in thoracic scoliosis. The anterior ribs on the concave side are pushed anteriorly." Excerpted from *THERAPEUTIC EXERCISE: Moving Toward Function* by Carrie M. Hall & Lori Thein Brody, pg. 566.

Many Pilates teachers work with clientele affected with scoliosis. Typically, scoliosis is seven times more likely to affect females than males. 80% of all scoliosis is idiopathic (without any known cause). Luckily, The Pilates Method can provide help due to the many exercises that address curvature, rotation and compression of the spine.

My personal scoliosis story starts at age 12 when I was diagnosed with a right lumbar C-curve. Like many young girls, I was given the option of wearing a torso brace or doing some exercises while my doctor observed me in order to detect a worsening condition. I declined the brace in favor of exercise. Later I added sports and dance to my daily schedule. Although I was able to participate in these activities, my discomfort was continual. Finally, in my 20's, I visited a chiropractor for this lower back pain.

Thankfully, he introduced me to Pilates, starting a journey of discovery for me.

Being a dancer at that time, I felt right at home with the Pilates work. During my studies in Beverly Hills, I learned all the basic Pilates exercises which benefit those with scoliosis:

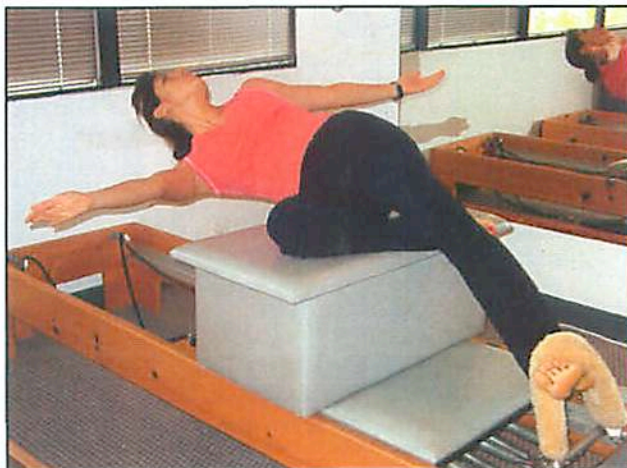
exercises such as Twist, Mermaid, One-Arm Roll backs, Saw, Side Arm Sit and Single Arm Swan Dive. Thanks to this work, I have enjoyed, despite my curvature, a life of running, dancing, paddling and childbirth...all back pain free!

In 1990, I moved to Hawaii only to discover that no one here had ever heard of Pilates. In 1993 I opened my own studio, On Balance, which was the only center offering Pilates work on Oahu for several years. Now, 11 years later, many Pilates studios can be found throughout Hawaii.

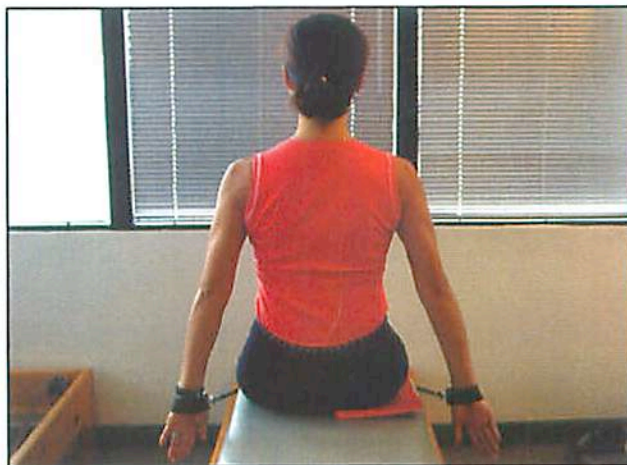
Despite my years of training and work in Pilates, my body awareness is still a challenge. I often do not know when I am rotating my pelvis, hiking my hip, or releasing my weak side pelvic floor. Jessica Dung, a Pilates teacher in my studio, has worked with me to help my body avoid deviation during exercise. With a Master's degree

in Physiology and a wonderful eye for alignment, Jessica has been able to target specific areas needing improvement, and together we have devised some practical modifications of the known syllabus which we hope will benefit others as well.

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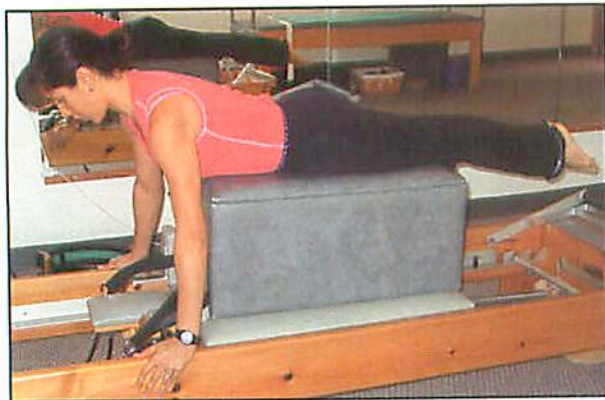


Oblique side over - left leg in strap, add extension and rotation to a side over on the box to target more left obliques.



Chest expansion - sitting, use pad under ischial tuberosity of the lengthened side to equalize the weight distribution between sitz bones. Kneeling, use pad under opposite knee to lengthen short side.

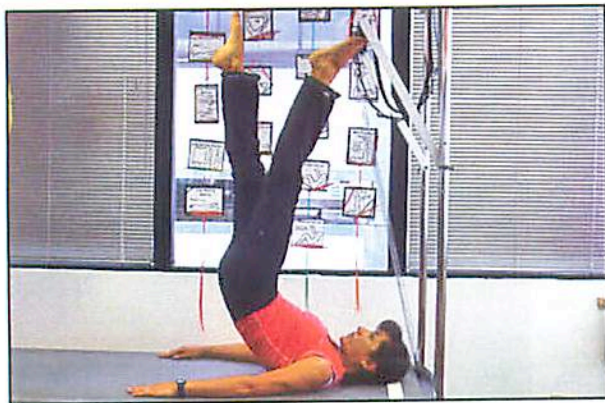
My scoliosis is present in my Thoracic to Lumbar spine (approximately T8 to L3) and we have used props and unilateral muscular work to place the spine in anatomical neutral. Through keen observation and frequent cueing, my chosen exercises require constant correction to prevent the further strengthening of the dominant side and ensure activation of the weaker side. The following exercises have been developed for scoliosis located in the T to L spine. A sharp outside eye is required to cue the spine to lengthen or rotate into its best alignment. The exercises can be reversed for right back weakness. For cervical to Thoracic spine scoliosis, you may try padding under the hand or elbow during closed chain exercises. These exercises specifically target my areas of weakness. They are not meant solely for structural scoliosis clients, but also can be useful for those with postural scoliosis. Clients with leg length discrepancies, mothers with shortened sides from child-carrying, unbalanced athletes such as golfers and tennis players can use these as a starting point to achieve the desired balance. Enjoy!



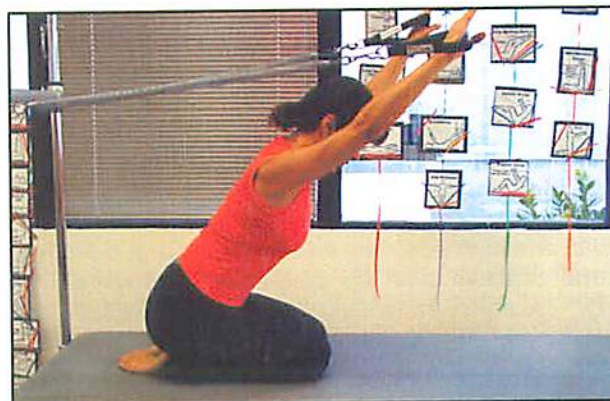
Pulling straps without straps - prone, place hands on wood rail in 120 degrees shoulder flexion. Pull box towards hands until 90 degrees shoulder flexion while adding spinal extension. Strengthens upper/mid back while challenging trunk stabilizers.



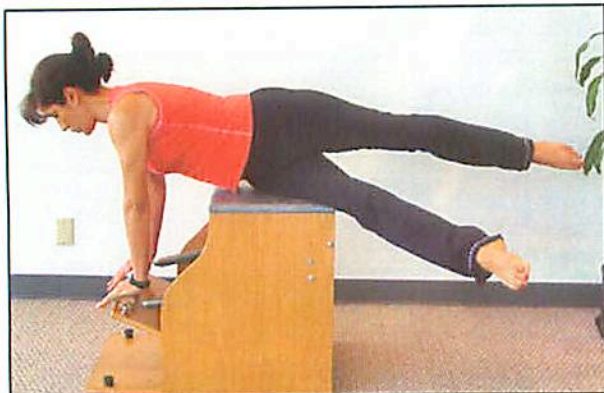
Prone one arm swim - lying on one side of Cadillac, add shoulder extension with back extension to target one side of back extensors.



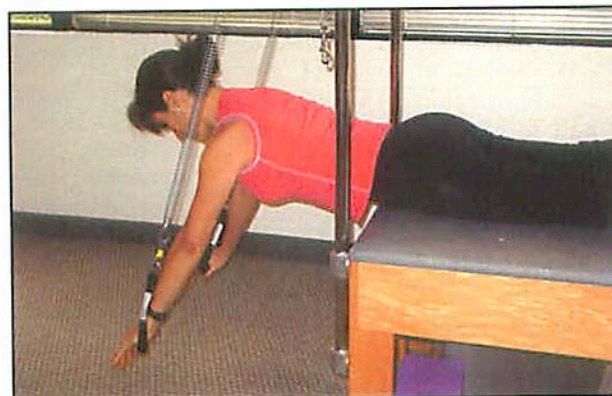
Single leg tower - supine single leg tower with one leg hovering below bar. Helps to create desired spinal rotation with hip flexion. Cue the spine to ascend and descend with both ASIS in the same plane.



Child's pose Rowing - sitting on heels, using arm springs from center. Snake out to flat back and add 180 degree shoulder flexion. Twist to right to work and lengthen left back extensors. Add a right-arm row to further challenge the left side.



Side lying swan twist - hands on foot bar, hips stacked, legs are in scissors. Move from plank position into back extension. Targets the back extensors of the top side and also obliques. Keep scapular stability.



Prone off Cadillac - using arm springs from top, feet under strap, ASIS at end of table. Go to plank pose with 90-degree shoulder flexion. Keeping scapular stabilization, add rotation in extension with one arm row. Twisting to the right activates left side back extensor.

Lisa Ortega Robertson is the owner of On Balance Studio, PhysicalMind Institute's Certifying Center in Hawaii. Ortega Robinson holds a BA in Theater Arts/Dance, and is a CPT with ACE & AFFA. She asks that you please write to her detailing any experiences you have had teaching Pilates to individuals with scoliosis at: onbalancestudio@hawaii.rr.com.