

# Reforming a Broken Relationship

After a series of injuries, Pilates helped me transition from feeling defeated to reconciling with my body

BY KRISTEN LAWSON

In 2011, while studying choreography at Concordia University, I developed patellofemoral syndrome. This causes pain around the kneecap, preventing me from doing activities like running, jumping and deep pliés. But with the help of a sports therapist, I was able to finish my degree.

Then, in 2016, I was in a three-car collision. My soft tissue was damaged all the way up my back, from my sacrum to my occipital ridge. Whiplash often fades in days or weeks, but in severe cases, like mine, it can last for years. I thought sports therapy would help me again after the car crash, but months later, I was still in constant pain.

Looking for relief, I started doing reformer Pilates because I heard it could help with injury recovery and prevention. These sessions became my favourite part of the week; they were the only times the tension in my back eased. Slowly, my range of motion began to return and I incrementally got stronger.

Pilates is resistance training that is gentle on the joints and emphasizes using the body efficiently. People are encouraged to do only what they can each day, accepting and working within their physical limitations – the opposite of the show-must-go-on mentality I internalized as a dancer. Pilates helped me transition from feeling broken and defeated to reconciling with my body after these injuries.

The exercise method was created by Joseph Pilates (1883-1967). As a child, he suffered from multiple illnesses. He tried every kind of exercise he could, from bodybuilding to yoga to jiu-jitsu, aiming to become strong and healthy. As an adult, he crafted his own exercise system that integrated all the principles from these other practices that had worked for him.

As an orderly in the First World War, he experimented with having patients work against the weight of the bedsprings so they could start rebuilding their strength while still bedridden. Later iterations of this apparatus became the Pilates reformer used today.

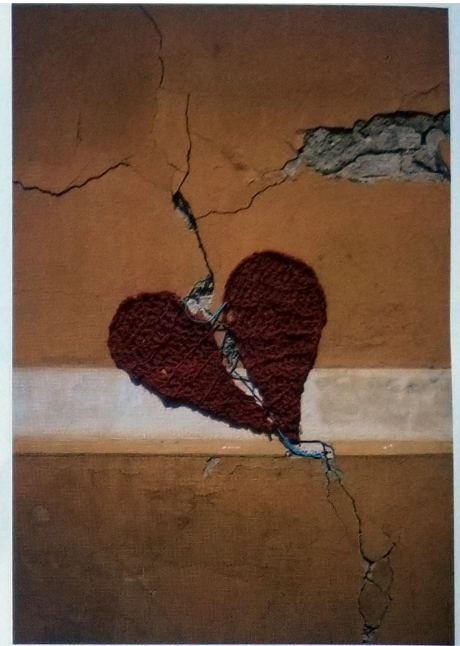
Many reformer exercises are done while sitting or lying down. This meant I could exercise my legs and manage my knee pain while relaxing the tight muscles in my back, neck and shoulders. I could also do extremely gentle exercises to stretch and strengthen my upper body without excess weight.

Physiotherapy helped, but Pilates worked better for me – I had to be there at specific times, and my instructors were always there to give corrections and answer questions. The semi-private reformer sessions also allowed for a custom workout. Exercises that inflamed my injuries were modified or replaced, and new exercises were added based on my needs. The focus on breath, balance, precision, flow and full body integration also appealed to me as a dancer.

I kept dancing after the crash in 2016, when I shouldn't have. I had a career to build, and I was willing to sacrifice my body for the sake of art. Even when I choreographed my own work, I included moves beyond my ability and smiled through the pain onstage.

Sometime in 2017, more than a year after the crash, I started to have moments when I didn't feel any pain. Before that, it had been a choice of feeling more pain while dancing or less pain while sitting still. The possibility of no pain at all changed everything.

It led me to make the most difficult decision of my life – I had to stop dancing. I had to rethink my relationship with dance and the way I interacted with my body. I learned to be kinder to myself, to put my



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health first. After all, you only get one body.

It took years of denial and anger before I was able to accept my physical limitations. Pilates was an integral part of that journey. It taught me to be patient with myself, to be gentle with my body to sustain it for as long as possible.

In September 2020, I signed up for ballet class, just for fun. For the past year, I have been able to take this weekly class without putting my body at risk. This opens up a lot of questions: What comes next? Am I ready to perform again, or do I have to wait until I'm fully healed? Is there even such a thing as fully healed?

I have options now, and the tools to protect myself, thanks to Pilates. And no matter where I land in dance, I know I'll keep practising Pilates for a very long time. ♦

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