

The Dynamics Of The Client-Teacher Relationship

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Working one on one with a client can be one of the most rewarding relationships within the realms of the Pilates workout. Initially our goal is to help our client become more fit and more aligned, but because we are working so intimately with core muscle groups and utilizing the breath in such a profound way, core emotions and awareness's can emerge during the workout. Your commitment as a teacher and your client's earned trust are two components essential in promoting effective change, and often leads to deep bonds between the two of you.

From the start, it's important to create a safe space for your client, which can be established even in a busy gym. It requires you to make sure your client knows that they're not being judged, and that you can compassionately hold the frustration, grief, and other emotions that may come up during the session. Of course there are boundaries that need to be in place, and I'm not suggesting overstepping the scope of our practice -- but when working deeply, you must be ready for the emotions that may emerge.

The one on one workout is like dancing with a partner. Most of the time as teachers we are leading, but sometimes the roles can be reversed, depending on the needs of the client. Normally when I'm finishing up with one client, I look up and greet my new one and note how they walk into the studio; are they bouncing in ready to start? Are they sluggish or agitated? As we begin I inquire how they're feeling and sometimes I get a monologue. That's when I quickly have to figure out how best to make the most of the hour. Here are a few pointers I've come up with over the years to accommodate and respond to the client's needs du jour:

- 1) If a client's agitated, it's best to take charge and get them moving. As the client concentrates on the breath and the exercises, the blood flows and they start to move out of their mental state and into their body. This helps them calm down and become more balanced.
- 2) If a client's brimming with sadness or holding a tremendous amount of tension, begin gently and focus on the breath. Frequently when I have a client in this condition, once we start moving the tears flow and often

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the story. Sometimes I just stop and listen for a moment. At times the emotion is big, and the best thing to do is to allow it to release. Once, shortly into the workout with a young woman, I touched her shoulders, physically cueing her to relax them, and she burst into tears. Who knows what those shoulders were holding – the weight of her world, perhaps? As I handed her a tissue, I reassured her that this release was part of the process, and after she wiped her tears, we continued.

3) If a client isn't taking verbal or physical cues, chances are their mind is wandering. Stop the exercise and ask them to refocus. I have one long-term client who I verbally cue with, “come back now, Judy,” and she focus's right up. If your client doesn't, “come back”, find out what's going on. You may get a lengthy explanation, but after they express their worry you'll know better how to proceed. If they continue to be distracted, keep the workout simple.

4) If a client's chattering, but doesn't seem distressed, it's likely they're trying to distract you as well as themselves. Sometimes a client finds it uncomfortable to work deeply and will do anything to avoid it. I normally guide them back to the task at hand, and explain that this conversation might be good over coffee and suggest we make a date. Keep it light, but this is a time to be strict and to guide them back to the exercise.

As you get to know your clients, you'll figure out what motivates them to do their best. Be flexible. One of the gifts of working closely with a client, and encouraging layers of change is the special bond that develops between the two of you, occasionally developing into a friendship outside of the studio. Regardless, teaching one on one is an inspiring journey. It's one that requires courage and commitment from both parties -- you show up for them, and they will work hard for you.

Cheryl Montelle has been teaching Pilates for almost 20 years. She trained with Kathy Grant and Jillian Hessel, who she later taught for before going into her own business. Cheryl also is on faculty in the dance department at Cal Arts.