

stretch therapy

This method, developed by Australian Kit Laughlin, will help diminish tension, enhance flexibility and give you better posture. Plus, it can help you take your Pilates practice to a new level.

by Sydney Craig

As a kid, I took dance class for years, but was never able to do the splits. In fact, I felt like I was the only one who never made it anywhere near all the way to the ground. I just accepted that I wasn't flexible and assumed the splits were just something that was unattainable for my body. I also

you need to have enough flexibility to do the actual moves. But my muscle tightness prevented me from doing a number of exercises. For instance, I couldn't do any of the classical exercises that required your leg and your back to be straight at the same time. My single leg circles were really Knee Stirs because I



Sydney Craig demonstrates one of her favorite stretches, Seated Side Bend With Rotation, which helps increase flexibility in the muscles that run from the top of the hip bones to the spine and the side muscles of the waist.

have scoliosis and tight back muscles. Finding Pilates was a huge benefit for me, yet my back would still often feel tight as would my hamstrings. So I was always searching for the perfect stretch for the tightness I felt all through my body.

Even though Pilates stretches and strengthens,

couldn't straighten my leg all the way up to the ceiling without my hip coming off the floor and cramping. My hamstrings would cramp in Bridge. And, don't even talk to me about Teaser!

When I was learning Pilates, I would find it so frustrating to be repeatedly asked by my teachers to

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- need to have enough flexibility to do the actual moves.



Back bend over a support is a favorite of Craig's students. It can be done over a large bolster, Spine Corrector or a foam roller.

correct something, but to not be able to do it no matter how hard I tried. Later, after I had become a Pilates teacher in 2005, I observed my students struggling to do the same moves I had tried to master for so long. It became crystal clear to me how many people in today's population have backs that simply do not move and ribcages that constantly flare no matter how much we cue them.

THE PERFECT THERAPY

Then in 2009, a mentor of mine, Rebecca Leone, told me about Stretch Therapy, a method developed by Australian Kit Laughlin. She said that Kit's work was the missing piece to the Pilates method and that Kit himself was indeed a "living Joe." If this were the case, I knew this work was something I needed to experience, not only to improve my teaching, but to create more comfort in my own body as well.

So, in 2010, I signed up for two of Kit's workshops. The first one was a six-day workshop called Stretch Therapist in Piacenza, Italy, which is based on Kit's book and DVD, *Overcome Neck and Back Pain*. I attended the second, Stretch Teacher workshop, which is based on Kit's book *Stretching & Flexibility*, on Grand Cayman Island last November.

The Stretch Therapy method is all about living comfortably in the body without unnecessary tension. One of the components of the method for reducing tension is called Contract-Relax (C-R). It is based on a 1953

publication called *Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation* (PNF). PNF is a detailed set of patterns of movement designed to re-educate the neuromuscular responses of people with cerebral or spinal injuries.

With Stretch Therapy, the muscle is put into a position where it is stretching gently, then the muscle is contracted isometrically for 6 to 10 seconds. The muscle remains in the stretch position after the contraction stops, then, on an exhale, the muscle is stretched further. This final position is held for 6 to 10 breaths. The whole exercise may be repeated two times (for a total of two reps per side). Depending on the needs of the people in the class, anywhere from 5 to 12 exercises are done in a one-hour session.

In Stretch Therapy, as in Pilates, more isn't always better. Stretch Therapy classes or sessions are recommended twice a week and no more than 3 times a week with rest days in between.

By doing Stretch Therapy, the resting muscle tonus (tension) is reduced, and once this done a number of times, the muscle gains new flexibility. Another subtle benefit is that as lifelong patterns of tension are released, better posture and alignment result.

ORIGINS OF STRETCH THERAPY

Laughlin stumbled upon Stretch Therapy completely by accident while living in Japan 25 years ago. He was in a local gym trying to stretch his own legs apart. He held on to a device in front of him, sitting with the



Kit Laughlin, who developed this method, demonstrates single-leg lunge hamstring stretch. Here's how it's done:

- 1. Hold trunk onto thigh; take in a breath**
- 2. Push the whole body back by pressing the front foot away**
- 3. To intensify the final position, straighten the back leg without letting the hips come away from the floor**

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legs as far apart as he could; but instead of pulling himself forward, he pulled back against the support (an isometric contraction). When he released the contraction, he found he was able to pull himself further forward into a deeper stretch.

His muscles had released! This discovery in his own body led him to deconstruct each Iyengar yoga pose into what Laughlin calls “functional units of flexibility.” Take Paschimottanasana, or Seated Forward Bend. The “functional units of flexibility” in this pose are ankle joint–gastrocnemius–soleus (calf muscles), flexion of the hip joint and flexion of the whole spine.

Stretch Therapy can also pinpoint the exact areas where people need to gain flexibility.

Identifying where the sensation is felt while doing this pose can help determine where areas of tightness are inhibiting it.

It's equally helpful for Pilates students who want to enhance their practice. “Stretch Therapy allows the integrity of Joseph’s original work to be experienced by more individuals,” explains Laughlin. “Adding this work to Joseph’s work is a way of unlocking people’s bodies that, in general, simply isn’t part of the way contemporary Pilates is taught now. Many Pilates teachers are ex-dancers and ex-gymnasts. These people are already flexible, whereas people who are not already flexible coming into the work (especially adult males) need other techniques to foster their flexibility.”

SHOW ME WHERE IT'S TIGHT

Stretch Therapy can also pinpoint the exact areas where people need to gain flexibility. For instance, often people mistakenly believe that they can't do a seated forward bend because they have tight hamstrings or a tight back; this isn't always the case. Often times it is tight calf muscles, tight piriformis or both that are preventing the movement.

To correct this problem, one of the exercises Laughlin recommends is a piriformis stretch. “A significant fraction of the population demonstrates varying intensities of piriformis syndrome (where part of the sciatic nerves passes directly through this muscle, instead of above or below),” he explains. “If this is the case, these students’ capacity to bend forward at the hips with straight legs is limited by this small muscle (it squeezes on that part of the sciatic nerve, limiting its capacity to lengthen and glide in response to the flexion requirement). While experienced in the hamstrings, the limitation is not caused by them. But working on a piriformis exercise can loosen this capacity markedly.”

While attending Kit’s workshops, I learned that certain muscles can get so tight that they can actually prevent other muscles from working. I found that my glutes were inactive, most likely because of my tight hip flexors! (No wonder my hamstrings cramped in Bridge!) Although the method is called Stretch Therapy, it also contains exercises for correcting issues such as inactive glutes or inactive Transverse

HOW YOU CAN LEARN STRETCH THERAPY

Kit Laughlin's books and DVDs, including *Overcome Neck & Back Pain* and *Stretching & Flexibility*, are great resources for learning more about Stretch Therapy. Both are available at www.kitlaughlin.com or pilatestonic.com. Kit will also

be teaching Stretch Therapist and Stretch Teacher workshops at various locations in the U.S. this fall, as well as presenting pre-con at this year's annual meeting of the Pilates Method Alliance. Check out www.kitlaughlin.com for a schedule.



Abdominals—both of which are key players to proper Pilates form.

FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE

I experienced first hand how Stretch Therapy exercises could help me get my glutes back in working order. One of the exercises involved lying on my back with my calves up on a stability ball. After the use of some specific cues, I pressed my legs onto the ball to lift my body off the ground. When this exercise is done correctly, the glutes will fire up to press the legs onto the ball and lift the body off the ground. (There is a video on YouTube of Kit demonstrating this exercise step by step.)

After successfully completing this exercise, my glutes were sore for a week! I was super aware of them for more than a month. It's amazing how much more toned my rear end has become since I began practicing Stretch Therapy. Plus, I could do Bridge now without my hamstrings cramping and I could feel my bottom working with every step I took!

Another stretch, the seated side bend, with rotation, helped my tight back. This stretch involves the muscles that run from the top of the hip bones to the spine, the side muscles of the waist and, in time, the deep muscles of the lower back, which got right into the tight spots of my back caused by scoliosis. It was intense, but felt amazing in my body!

Getting rid of the tension in so many parts of my torso has made holding my back straight when I need to “grow taller” much easier. The curve of my spine in a roll down is now a smooth crescent moon shape. When I extend my spine for Swan, my mid and upper back move, so I'm not cranking into my low back to lift. And my spine twist has become so much more fluid. I can actually sense my spine in my body and not just my tight left side. I was astonished at the progress I could make in my Pilates practice once simple biomechanics like these were in order!

SPREADING THE MESSAGE

I returned home from Kit's workshops with new and different tools in my toolbox not just for myself, but for my clients. Many of them struggle, muscling their way

through their sessions, trying hard to accomplish what I ask them to do. What Kit's work has helped me realize is that if a person is simply too tight in certain muscles, no amount of cueing or use of muscular force is going to get them into ideal alignment.

I added a stretching & flexibility class, which are based on the principles of Stretch Therapy, to my studio's schedule. What I focus on in each class is really determined by who comes that day and what's going on in their body. For the most part, I start with smaller back stretches and a standing balance that stretches the hip flexors. In most classes, there is also a wall calf stretch, piriformis stretch, hip flexor stretch and hamstring stretch. From there, I incorporate a variety of back stretches that include forward flexion, side bending, extension and rotation.

A favorite of the students is a back bend over a support. The supports I use are either large, firm bolsters, spine correctors or foam rollers. This one feels amazing! People leave this class with huge smiles on their faces. Common comments I hear after class are, “How do you expect me to get home? I'm all noodly!” Even more often I hear, “I love this class; I look forward to it every week.” This week, I had a woman tell me she had been having chronic pain in her shoulder the previous week. I taught her a stretch for pectoralis major in class. The next week, she said the pain had stopped and had not returned.

Besides enhancing your Pilates practice, Stretch Therapy can improve your daily life by providing the tools for ridding the body of excess tension and literally helping you become more comfortable in your body. In our modern world, stress and tension in the body is something people just accept as “life.”

As for my splits, I'm coming closer to the ground than I've ever been. By the end of 2011, I'll be there! **ps**

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Sydney Craig, owner of Pilates Tonic in Chattanooga, TN, is a PMA-certified instructor and mother of two. Seeing how Pilates and Stretch Therapy have improved the lives of a wide variety of clients motivates Sydney to seek out new techniques to help them reach their fitness goals.