

core lessons from the ancient maya

how abdominal massage and pilates work together

by Linda Knittel

A few months ago, on the evening of the winter solstice, I sat in front of a blazing fire with six women who have been taught healing secrets of the ancient Maya. They all practice Maya abdominal massage, a deeply powerful work focused on improving the health of the tissues and organs of the abdomen and pelvis—a natural complement to Pilates, or so I

the midwives, healers and shamans of Central America, who believed that most female reproductive troubles were due to a wandering womb.

“A woman’s uterus is the spiritual center of her being; if it’s out of balance, then her entire life will be imbalanced,” says Rosita Arvigo, a Chicago-born naprapathic doctor who spent 12 years in Belize



thought. It seems none of these women had explored the relationship between the two. In fact, a few seemed concerned that, fundamentally, they might be at odds. Fortunately, what I discovered was just the opposite.

secrets of the maya

Maya massage, or “the work,” as many practitioners call it, is an ancient, external, non-invasive technique of massaging the abdomen, pelvis and lower back along with some simple stretching. The technique has been passed down from generation to generation through

apprenticing with Don Elijio Panti, one of the last Maya shamans in Central America, and later began teaching the techniques and certifying practitioners around the world.

Arvigo estimates nearly 90 percent of women will have a misplaced or tipped uterus at some point in their lives, a result of everyday events such as falls, running and wearing high heels. “If your uterus is misplaced, a whole host of symptoms can arise,” says Corrine Porterfield-Brown, LMT, a Maya massage practitioner in Portland, OR. Such symptoms include low back pain,

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PMS, painful periods, infertility, constipation, painful intercourse and more.

Maya massage can also be used to treat digestive issues and facilitate the normal flow of breath, blood and energy throughout the body. What's more, men can benefit from the work as well. Maya massage can ease the male pelvic congestion that often causes painful urination, prostate swelling, infertility, impotence, constipation and hemorrhoids.

“The work is all about restoring the body to proper hemodynamics, which means the adequate flow of blood and proper lymphatic drainage,” says Porterfield-Brown. “Once that is established, we know that the internal healing powers of the body will take over.”

my maya adventure

I was in desperate need of some internal healing when I first booked a session with Porterfield-Brown. If symptoms are the body's way of saying something is wrong, then the erratic periods, heavy bleeding, severe cramping and cystic acne I had developed at the age of 38 were more like a scream for help. I feared I was suffering from fibroids as my sister had, or worse. What if, just when I was finally ready to have a baby, I couldn't conceive. I had to get answers.

First stop was the office of my OB/GYN, whose prodding, probing, and testing ruled out fibroids, endometriosis, and early menopause. And although I pushed her for some kind of explanation, she simply instructed me to wait six months and see if things improved. But I decided to try a more hands on approach.

I had known about the practice of Maya abdominal massage for years. I had heard about it, knew a handful of women who credited it with their “miracle” pregnancies, I even had two good friends who practiced the technique, and yet I had never tried it.

At the start of my first session, Porterfield-Brown led me into a tranquil room with a massage table, soothing music and a thick cloud of sweet smelling copal—a tree resin that, when burned, is believed to rid a person of harmful thoughts, cleanse a space of fear or envy and act as an offering to the Mayan gods and goddesses. After filling out a lengthy questionnaire on everything from the color of my menstrual blood to my food allergies, we talked in depth about any symptoms I was



Mayan ruins from the Yucatan Peninsula: Chichen Itza with the great pyramid (the Temple of Kukulkan)

having, my health history and how I was feeling both emotionally and spiritually.

With that, she had me lie down on the table. The massage is performed in a traditional and specific way passed down from Panti to Arvigo and then from Arvigo to her 500 or so certified students. It begins by applying a light coat of oil on the belly. Porterfield-Brown used oil made from herbs collected in Belize under the full moon, although she says that any massage oil or even olive oil will do. Next, with her hands together, palms facing down and thumbs hooked together, she placed her fingertips on the upper edge of my pelvic bone, right in the center. She slowly and firmly pressed downward, then ran them toward my belly button as though scooping a hole in the sand. She did this two more times, then she moved to the left edge of the pelvic bone, scooped toward the center three times, and moved on to the right side. “Ah ha, your uterus is way over to the right,” she said. “Want to feel it?”

She guided my hands through the scooping movements in the center and on the left side of my pelvis. Then, when we tried to perform the same movement on the right, there was resistance—I simply could not scoop nearly as deeply. It was amazing; I could clearly feel my uterus had shifted to the right. Porterfield-Brown worked a bit more on realigning my uterus, then sent me home with instructions to perform the massage on myself two or three times a week between menstrual cycles. In addition, she started me on a three-month regimen of an herbal tonic used to shed the uterine walls of old, hardened blood.

“Cleaning the uterine wall, and returning the uterus to the right position provides it with a good blood supply, so it no longer has to work as hard—cramping and squeezing to clean itself out,” says Arvigo.

Over the next few months I had one more session with Porterfield-Brown, I managed to do the self-



“Porterfield-Brown sent me home with instructions to perform the massage. Miraculously, my cycles evened out within one month’s time.”

care massage twice a week and was pretty good about taking my herbs. By the middle of the second month, my cycles had gone back to normal in length and volume, my cramps had drastically diminished, and my skin had cleared up dramatically. Frankly I was stunned. It was true, my body had returned to balance as soon as my uterus was centered. What’s more, a mere four months after starting the treatment I was pregnant. I call that results!

core values

Having seen for myself that Maya massage can improve one's health, I set out to learn if it could improve one's Pilates practice too. “There is a lot more to Maya massage than just realigning the uterus, and it can be very helpful for men as well,” says Izumi Takiguchi, an L.A.-based Pilates instructor and Maya massage therapist. For instance, the Maya work can be used to release muscles and nerves in the mid and lower back.

Maya Uterine Massage Self-Care

Maya uterine massage can benefit women of all ages* and is both therapeutic and preventative. It is helpful to seek the advice and instruction of a Maya massage practitioner before embarking on a self-care regimen.



1. With an empty bladder, lie on your back with a pillow under your knees and breathe deeply. If desired, apply a light coat of oil to your lower abdomen.

2. Bring both of your hands together, tucking one thumb under the other. Create a scoop with your hands by bringing all of your fingers close

together and slightly bending them in a relaxed position. It is best if your fingernails are trimmed short.

3. Place your fingertips on the upper edge of the pubic bone and then, on an exhalation, sink your fingers into the flesh just above the pubic bone and scoop toward your navel. Repeat two more times.

4. Next, do three scooping strokes from the left side of the pelvic bone toward the navel, followed by three more from the right side. Be sure to use the proper hand positioning to help create a scooping motion. Perform a total of three sets of three strokes in each direction.

5. Be sure to listen to your body and use your intuition to determine proper pressure and speed. Stop if you experience intense pain or discomfort and seek the advice of a practitioner.

* Do not perform this practice if you have had recent abdominal or pelvic surgery, are in the first trimester of a pregnancy, have an IUD inserted, are currently bleeding, or if your period is due to start within five days.

- “Maya massage can help release the diaphragm and improve breath work—an essential part of Pilates.”

“In Pilates, we always talk about bending at the bra line, and using Maya massage to open up the back allows this to happen much more easily,” says Takiguchi.

“Oh yes, they work together well,” says practitioner Becky Wyland, BS, CH, CN, CMT, of Longmont, CO, who is certified in both Pilates and Maya massage. “I end up using both techniques on 95 percent of my clients. If they come to see me for Maya work, I usually wind up pulling out some kind of Pilates exercises that I know will help. On the other hand, if I am doing Pilates with them, it is not uncommon that I will find imbalances going on, and we will wind up using Maya abdominal massage to help realign the deep tissues first.”

For example, a dancer came to see Wyland for Pilates work, complaining about a chronic knee issue. After observing her movements, it became clear that her psoas was super tight and restricted on same side as the sore knee. Wyland then asked her about her cycle, and learned that it had been painful, heavy and irregular for months. “To me, all those dots connect. It was a problem at the root of the body—not the knee.” And sure enough, when Wyland performed some Maya massage on the dancer, she realized that her uterus was stuck way over to the same side as the psoas and knee issues. Realigning the uterus with Maya massage helped open both and relieve the pain.

Maya massage can also help release the diaphragm and improve breath work—an essential part of Pilates. “One of the things I often see in people who are new to Pilates is that they have a difficult time bringing the breath down and in,” says Hyland. “If they can’t get the breath down into the abdomen and they don’t have good expansion of the ribcage, I’ll use the Maya work and things open right up,” she says.

Like Pilates, Maya massage also aims at keeping the lymph moving. “Stagnated lymphatic fluid is often the cause of pain and imbalance in the abdominal and pelvic organs,” says Catherine Gregory, LMT, a Maya massage practitioner in Fort Collins, CO. While Pilates uses movements to get the lymph going, Maya massage practitioners use gentle rocking, tapotement massage, and a light sweeping of the hands over the nodes in the upper legs and the groin. Perhaps the greatest impact of Maya massage on one’s Pilates practice is through increased body awareness. For example, regularly performing the self-care massage (see “Maya Uterine Massage Self-Care”) is a great way to deepen one’s

connection to the breath and body, which in turn makes performing Pilates exercises a good deal easier.

But benefits can be seen in the other direction too. “Clients who are already experienced in Pilates are much more intuitive when they then try Maya work. They know how to direct their breath, lengthen certain muscles, and overall have a much greater awareness of their bodies,” says Hyland.

harmonious conjunction

So rather than being at odds with one another, Pilates and Maya abdominal massage are actually quite complementary. “The ultimate focus of both is to get everything in the body working together in harmony,” say Hyland. “I often find the quickest way to do that with a client is to correct deep imbalances with the Maya work first, then the Pilates comes more easily.”

But what about Pilates instructors who aren’t trained in the Maya work? How will they know when Maya massage might benefit a client? “A good Pilates instructor will notice deep imbalances in pelvic alignment,” says Hyland. For example, if a client is doing Bridge and the pelvis moves as one solid piece instead of being able to do a great roll, or if during standing Hip Stretch or going into Leg Slides there is an obvious pull to one side, a teacher may want to suggest a client find a Maya abdominal massage practitioner. Luckily, thanks to Rosita Arvigo and her Institute, there are now certified practitioners all over the world, which are listed at arvigotherapy.com.

“I would encourage all Pilates instructors to go get a Maya massage treatment, then hop on the Reformer afterward,” says Hyland. “Or, better yet, go do Pelvic Circles afterward and feel the difference—it’s quite incredible.”

Linda Knittel, MA, is a nutritional anthropologist and freelance writer living in Portland, OR.



Practitioner Rosita Arvigo with teacher and Maya shaman, Don Elijo Pant