

How Much Is the Right Amount?

by Mara Sievers

When you come to a Pilates class, you're probably looking for a good workout. You may also be looking for a class that is challenging enough so you feel you're on a path of growth, transformation, and healing. But, the class should not be *SO* challenging that you feel you cannot keep up and you leave class or you wake up the next day in pain. This leads to an important question: how do you find a balance in your Pilates practice? While your instructor might know which exercises are more challenging and which ones are less, she cannot know exactly what *YOUR* body is experiencing.

With this in mind, below are two scales you can use to measure your workout: The Control Scale and the Stretching Scale. These will help you (hopefully) make the best decisions about when and how much to challenge yourself, and when and how much to ease off or take a break during class, as well as help you tell when the risk of injury is greater than the benefit of the exercise. There is a point when trying to achieve more and having a will of steel does not take you further into your practice, but simply increases your risk of getting hurt.

First, I need to point out that no matter what form of physical exercises one does, there is always a risk of injury. In group classes we tend to push ourselves to try to keep up with the person next to us, makes this an even more important thing to watch out for. In a home practice or a private session, there is no one else with whom to compare yourself. You get to focus just on you and how each movement feels in your body. And that's really all that matters: that *YOU* are getting stronger, that *YOU* are moving with more ease, that *YOU* develop a wider range of motion in your joints, that *YOUR* hips support your legs when you run, and that *YOUR* shoulders feel fine after a game of tennis or golf.

What does not matter (at all!) is if your exercise looks exactly the same as it looks on the person next to you. Who cares? You might have a longer torso but shorter legs, or vice versa. Don't you think that will change the relationship of the body to gravity and the way each exercise looks? In fact, the "comparison muscle" is one we actually try to weaken in Pilates! Your Pilates workout is about *YOUR* body. Make sure you're listening to it.

The Edge: Where Comfort Meets Discomfort

It often seems difficult for us to decide how far we need to go for it to be "enough." How big does the stretching sensation have to be? How much (oh, do I dare to use the word?) pain can one bear in a certain pose?

We were raised in a "no pain, no gain" mindset. Obviously, we think, if I don't feel anything, it's not working. We tend to conclude that the more we feel (even if it hurts), the more the body will benefit, open up, and build muscle.

Well, hold on a second! This mindset makes working out a struggle, a fight against the body. I don't know about you, but anytime I fight against my body, it doesn't make me feel good about me at all.

Too much can be too much, and can actually be counter-productive! Let's say I force a stretch on a muscle that just doesn't want to let go. First of all, it's uncomfortable, so it's definitely not enjoyable. Why in the world would I put myself in so much pain and possibly set myself up for a self-inflicted injury? Secondly, that tight muscle might be protecting a weaker structure underneath, and if I force it, I open up that weaker structure to injury as well.

Yes, of course: in order to become stronger or more flexible we need to go beyond our limits of comfort; otherwise we will not improve. But how much or how little is enough?

Here's where the idea of surfing your edge comes in. This means we move right to where we feel sensation (but not pain) and hang out there until the body adapts. To do this, move mindfully, as far as you can, in the direction of where you want to go without causing pain. Then wait for the body to make a favorable adaptation. Next time you do the same movement, you might naturally move a little bit deeper. Your edge has shifted.

If you can keep this up, you will find that your strength and flexibility improve without side effects like sore muscles, tweaked shoulders, or new injuries.

Here are two scales that many exercise and physical therapists use to determine how to find and safely surf your edge. The first is the Control Scale, which measures physical ability combined with concentration. The next is the Stretching Scale, which measures physical sensation. Both are scales of 1 to 10, with the Control Scale counting backward (from 10 to 1).

The Control Scale

To surf your edge, stay somewhere in the 6-9 range, where physical ability is challenged but concentration is still focused.

10: The body is still. There is full mental focus, but basically there's no work, no movement at all.

9-6: These are the levels where the exercise can be easily controlled and many repetitions can be performed correctly. The mind accompanies the movement, and joint and muscle movement are visualized. Here is where you can play with surfing your edge.

5-1: These are the levels where a lack of focus or a distraction can easily lead to injury. Either the body is not able to perform the movement that the mind envisions, or the mind is distracted so the movement is not being done correctly. In other words, the driver has lost control over the vehicle. Avoid these levels; they lead to injury and pain.

0: Complete loss of control and mental focus. You know that you're thinking of something else. If you realize you are here, stop what you are doing. Come back to it only when you can focus.

The Stretching Scale

This simple scale starts when no stretch occurs and no pain is felt (0) and goes to where the pain level is unbearable (10). This position cannot be maintained. In each movement or stretch, check in with your level of sensation and adjust if needed.

0-5: You might feel a mild stretch; continued stretching in this zone is safe.

6-8: You experience a strong muscular stretch but no pain. This stretch has a beneficial muscular feeling to it, like relief: you feel the tension falling away. You know that you are able to maintain the position comfortably. You are able to breathe in and out slowly, deeply and controlled. This has a "doing you good" feeling to it. One of my students usually shouts out in class, "It hurts so good!" You know you are really doing some work; you are being challenged. Stay in these levels to surf your edge.

9: At this level, the feel of the stretch or movement changes from one of comfort to one of discomfort and pain. Here, damage may occur. It's better to back off.

10: This is unbearable pain and should never be experienced.

You can improve your strength and flexibility without feeling pain. For many of us, backing off is actually harder and requires more willpower than pushing ourselves through something that hurts. Yes, it's true! I dare you...do you have the mental discipline to NOT push too hard? Find your edge and surf it, and you may soon find yourself pain-free and in better shape than you could have imagined!