

CORE

from the Body's Perspective

Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle's world-renowned 3Core Connections® Perspective teaches you how to decrease tension throughout your body—and improve your Pilates practice—by exploring the core as a relationship with gravity, ourselves, others and our environment.

by Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle

When I came to Pilates in the early '90s, I was already a longtime yoga teacher and holistic coach. Pilates had just started emerging, but for the most part, was unknown to the general population.

While attaining my certification, my husband, Michael, and I established The Pilates Center of Austin, the first Pilates studio in the city. Although I came to see just how profound this work was, at the same time, I began to notice how very “held” I felt in my “core.” I didn’t have the words for that feeling at the time, but it led me to inquire into a seminal question: Rather than a concept of “core,” what is core from the body’s perspective?

This exploration took me to study with great somatic teachers and pioneers in the fields of whole mind/body movement, neuroscience and energy medicine. What I began to see is that by reinforcing habits of effort and bracing—with language like “navel to spine” and “pull your shoulders down”—we’re asking ourselves to place too much effort on movement, leading to the over-recruitment and shortening of our muscles, which in turn, adversely affects our neck, back, shoulder and hip health. In contrast, by taking off the “parking brake” of core control and instead, thinking of “core coordination,” we discover the roots of our arms and legs through a multidimensional body, in relationship with gravity and space.

As I studied, I began to see that the core from the body’s perspective begins with our sense of balance and our perceived relationship with gravity. After years of searching for a way to articulate these distinctions, I discovered the most wonderful black-and-white anatomical illustrations by the 18th-century anatomist Albinus. The figures are engaged, gesturing, connected—very different from the static depiction of muscles and bones in contemporary, dissective anatomy. These brilliant images proved to be the perfect, living landscape upon which to superimpose the energetic “connections,” which would later become the basis for my 3Core Connections® Perspective.

While mapping these connections, through what I now call the “3 Cores” (“Lower,” “Central” and “Upper”) onto my own experiential engagement with the effect of gravity on my body, my awareness of how I moved within my body came alive. My perception of anatomy suddenly became a living anatomy, rather than a collection of parts and pieces.



ABOVE: THE INNER EAR IS THE FIRST SENSE THAT AWAKENS IN THE WOMB, AND IT IS THROUGH THAT SENSE THAT WE DISCOVER OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GRAVITY AND OUR SENSE OF BALANCE. WHEN WE ALLOW OURSELVES TO “PARTNER WITH GRAVITY,” WE AWAKEN OUR “PERCEPTUAL AND RECEPTIVE SYSTEMS,” A PORTAL TO A RESPONSIVE WAY OF LIVING.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROD FOSTER; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY AMELIA C. AND CO.; TOP BY ICEBREAKER; HER OWN PANTS

When we discover these core connections within, we begin to experience the core as interconnected relationships—with gravity, ourselves, one another and our environment. We then learn how to “yield” into gravity’s support. Our bones are more balanced in functional alignment, and so we feel less tension. We discover effort with ease in our movement, our practice, our daily life.

This was the epiphany that came out of my inquiry into why I was feeling so “held” in my Pilates practice. I could now see how much tension I was carrying. Once I saw how much I was trying to do

something with/to my abdominals, I let go. It became clear to me that the body doesn’t care whether we call it Pilates, yoga, Alexander, Feldenkrais, Nia, Continuum—or, for that matter, washing the dishes. What it does care about is if we’re moving with awareness.

I have spent the past 20 years bringing to life this conversation with the body that has birthed the 3Core Connections Perspective to build on Joseph Pilates’ vision of “whole-body health.” A special thanks to my mentor, Hubert Godard, for teaching me the “bones” of this practice.

The following Fascial-Dog Series, which can be done anywhere, is one of our favorite home practices that we teach at Pilates Center of Austin. As you move through it, you will experience that, by accessing the portals of our hands, feet, two directions of the spine and soft eyes/peripheral vision, we are engaging the body’s “movement brain,” which creates a deeper sense of being at home within ourselves. Our movements become more seamless as we dive deeper within our Pilates practice, re-energizing our bodies from our bio-intelligent wisdom. **PS**

FASCIAL DOG SERIES

Phase I



STEPS 1 & 2

PROP: chair (If you have wider shoulders, use 2 chairs side by side.)

PURPOSE:

- wakes up the perineural nervous system (the connective tissue body system responsible for wound healing and injury repair, which controls the central nervous system), allowing the “tensegrity” of the connective tissue to support the muscles and bones in movement
- awakens “core coordination” instead of “core control,” where sensory receptors in the hands and feet ignite perceptual awareness
- evokes a reciprocal relationship between “stability” and “mobility”
- stimulates the mind/body connection by increasing “power” while decreasing “effort”
- strengthens vestibular awareness and postural tone from foot to head
- awakens orientation to “gravity as a partner”

SETUP: Stand about an arm’s length away from the chair, feet hip-width apart with bent knees, and place the heels of your hands near the front edge of the chair. Allow the texture, mass, temperature, etc., of what you are touching to be received through your hands and feet. (By opening your mind to sense impression, your body starts to notice its relationship to itself and the environment, orienting your body to flowing movement.)

1. Extend your tail away from your hands, straightening your arms. Roll from the inside to the outside of each of your feet, sensing your weight, then come back to center.

LOOK DEEPER: This action “tells” your feet where to be in relationship with your hands, elongating your spine, instead of setting your feet and then placing your hands second, which can limit the natural elongation of your spine from head to tail.

2. Exhale, sensing how heavy your feet are, and gently begin to straighten your legs without locking your knees. Notice that your spine naturally rounds your head toward your hands, and your tail toward your feet, floating your solar plexus (lower sternum) up toward the ceiling. Refresh the sensation in your hands and feet, breathing naturally, to notice a deepening of your shoulder blades gliding (like a waterfall) down toward your internal belly lift. Notice how your abdominals naturally follow your diaphragm on your exhale, creating a “hovering” feeling, or scooping action, along your spine with no effort.

LOOK DEEPER: This action of “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly” is the body’s natural powerhouse that we can take into any movement. The difference here is that the body’s experience of powerhouse is very liquid, like 2 rivers—1 flowing down your back, from shoulder blades to feet, and the other flowing up your front, from inner ankles to inner ears. So, even though we seem to not be moving in “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly,” the breath is always moving our body internally and the powerhouse becomes an open highway where the feet, hands, spine and head coordinate their communication for every movement—in any discipline!

Phase I continues on the next page! →

3. Float forward onto the balls of your feet, keeping your shoulder blades, tailbone and heels heavy as you float forward, while sensing the “hover” of your spine. (You are awakening your natural “Domes of Uplift”—the connection between your inner ankles, pelvic floor, diaphragm, thoracic inlet and armpits to your palate!) Keep floating your hover forward until you sense your triceps connecting with your “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly” support, breathing naturally.

LOOK DEEPER: This is an important feeling that will help your transition to Phase II. Refresh your hands and feet, allowing your breath to open your hands and feet to your whole body.

4. Pressing gently into your hands and leading with your tail, float your

“hover” away from your hands. Return to the position in step 1.

LOOK DEEPER: You may notice that your sitz bones can release back further, or you may be able to sit down toward your heels in a partial or full squat with your heels on the floor, since your spine has lengthened and your back has widened, creating more space in your entire body. Do 3 reps of Phase I before moving on to Phase II.

TIP: The “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly” connection with the back of your arms is our 3Core Connections “Upper Core” platform for any inversion, preventing your neck from bearing the weight of your body.

MODIFICATION: If you have wrist tension, notice if you lose your

relationship with space/periphery (the ability to see the sides of the room), as you sense the floating of your spine toward the ceiling. Over-compression onto the wrist joint is the major cause of shoulder and neck problems. By “sharing the load” of the body, from foot to spine to head to hand through tensegrity, we open our joints and our body rediscovers its self-healing fluidity.

ADVANCED: By slowing down and sensing “what effort we can let go of,” we open to the world of bio-intelligence, where our body begins to teach us and will tell us what it needs to refresh itself on an ongoing basis, especially within structured movements like Pilates. The question is, are we listening or pushing it beyond its limits?

Phase II



PROP: chair

PURPOSE:

- evokes the core through the “Inner Ear and Eyes Leading spine,” instead of through abdominal tightening
- strengthens the “Upper Core”
- strengthens the relationship of the head, hands and spine to the feet



SETUP: Same as in Phase I.

1. Repeat steps 1–2 of Phase I.

2. Repeat step 3 of Phase I. As you float your “hover” forward toward your hands, sensing the back of your arm connection to “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly” support, notice that you will come to that place where you either have to go forward or return. Pause there and breathe naturally.

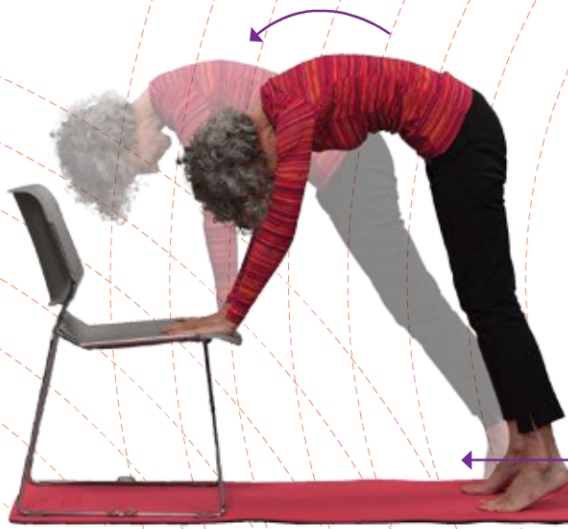
3. Looking forward, allow your eyes to lead your spine into extension as you bend your knees, bringing your hips toward your hands. Your knees will be floating off the floor. Your heels are releasing back to support your hip extension, which allows your chest to open. Refresh the sensations in your hands and feet.

4. As you build comfort and strength with Phase II, remain in the position and press gently into each hand, while looking in each direction as each heel releases back. Notice a deeper relationship with your natural, postural internal lift through your spine, from your inner ankle to your inner ear, as the multifidus (muscles deep within the spine) and other gravity-based spinal muscles are

stimulated. Keep breathing naturally with soft eyes as you look and rotate your torso from side to side.

5. Return to the position in step 1 by looking down toward your hands, pressing gently into them and floating your chest, spine and hips away from your hands. Release your whole foot to the floor, and allow your tail to send your sitz bones away from your hands and toward your heels.

6. Notice the differences in your spine length, back widening, ease of motion in a squat and possible release of your leg and foot tension as your feet, legs, hips and spine continue to open more deeply. Do 3 reps of Phase II before moving on to Phase III.



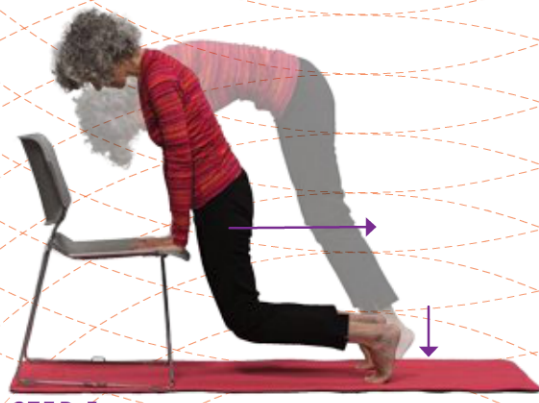
STEP 3



STEP 4



STEP 4



STEP 5

TIP: When we allow the movement of our eyes up the wall to lead our bodies into extension in Phase II, it deepens our relationship with our "gravity-based internal support," opening the shoulder and hip joints to create a more flowing understanding of exercises like Swan.

MODIFICATION: If you have difficulty moving into full extension with your hips forward toward your hands/wrists, be aware of sensing the "Waterfall of the Shoulder Blades Down Your Back" as you build the movement toward full extension by placing partial weight on your hands as you begin to look up, and then return to the position in step 1. If you find yourself locking your elbows, notice if you're preventing the waterfall sensation of your shoulder blades down your back.

ADVANCED: With your hips forward, press gently into each hand, rotating your spine as you look in each direction, while releasing each heel back. Play with ipsilateral and contralateral (when one heel reaches back as the other releases forward slightly, eyes following the movement).



STEP 6

Phase III on the next page! →

Phase III

PROP: chair

PURPOSE:

- evokes a deeper relationship with the "Two Directions of the Spine," gravity and space
- cultivates the body's innate, contralateral coordination for natural walking
- strengthens and balances the foot-to-head relationship through a buoyant pelvis
- cultivates strength, balance, stability and mobility and "effort with ease"



SETUP

STEP 1

SETUP: Get into a lunge position, with your right foot forward close to the chair, and your left leg extended fully behind you, with the ball of your foot on the ground and your heel in the air (or against a wall for support). Sense the "Two Directions of the Spine" from the reach forward through your inner ears and the reach behind you through your heel, while maintaining weight and stability through your hands on the chair and your feet on the floor. Soften your gaze to sense the support of the space around your body.

1. Sensing your spine floating forward and your "Inner Ear Leading Head," spring off your back foot, transferring the weight onto your front foot and hands. Reach your back leg into the air (or onto a wall behind you for more feedback), again, sensing the "Two Directions of the Spine" (forward through your inner ear and backward through your foot in the air or on the wall).

2. Transfer your weight onto the hand of your standing foot, and rotate your head, trunk and extended leg to face toward the same side.

3. Extend your unsupported arm toward the ceiling, sensing the relationships between your hands, feet and head.

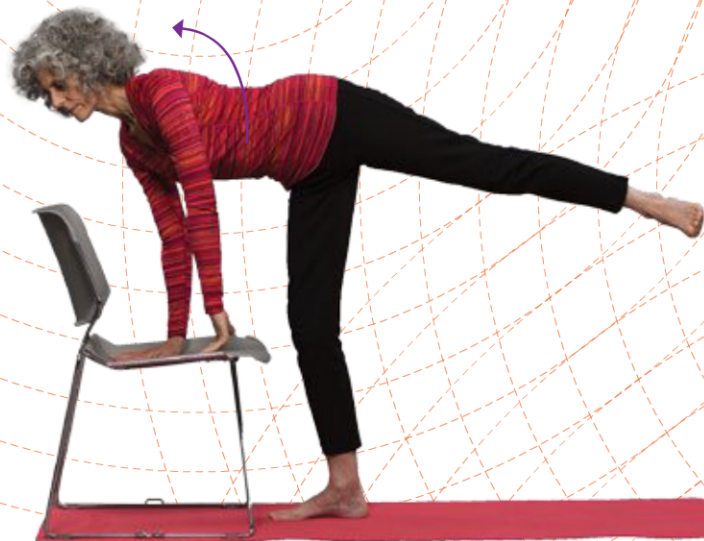
LOOK DEEPER: Your body is supported by the many vectors of limbs and your head reaching in many directions into the space and ground. This core support means the body's natural coordination is being evoked, but with little or no sense of effort.

4. Standing on the same leg, transfer your weight to your opposite hand and counter-rotate your trunk, head and leg to face the opposite direction.

LOOK DEEPER: You are deeply strengthening the spiralic relationships between your shoulder and pelvic girdles that support a buoyant pelvis, strong "Central Core" and the roots of your arms and legs to your spine.

5. Play with repeating each direction 3 times on the same standing leg.

LOOK DEEPER: Notice that the process of challenging the standing leg with changing directions creates more strength, flexibility, tone, coordination and balance throughout your entire body.



STEP 2



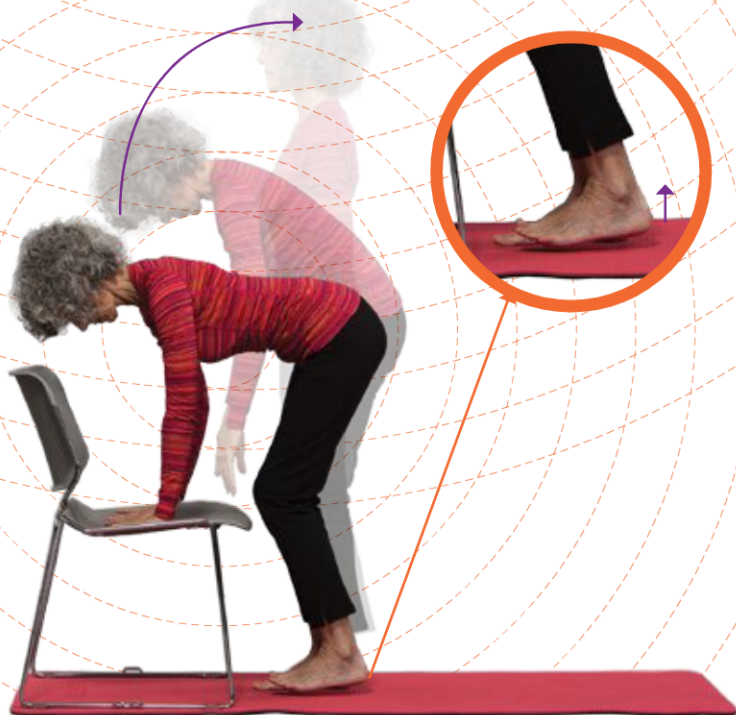
STEP 3

Gear Guide

Merrithew Health & Fitness™
Eco-Friendly Mat
(\$46.99; www.merrithew.com)



STEP 4



STEP 6

6. Come back to center, float your right leg toward your left, and begin to stand up by pouring yourself into your feet, releasing the weight of your tail without tucking it. Walk around and see what you notice: What feels more fluid? Does each foot feel more naturally grounded?

LOOK DEEPER: Notice that, without tightening your abdominals, your belly and internal organs fall back toward your widening back as you stand up with a deeper awareness of your relationship with “gravity as a partner”:

- “Down the Back”: waterfall of your shoulder blades and sitz bones/tailbone to the tripod of your feet
- “Up the Front”: internal lift of the domes of your inner arches, inner thighs, pelvic floor and front of your spine to your inner ears
- “Shoulder Blades to Internal Belly” support: a new awareness for the powerhouse, without excess gripping

7. Repeat the exercise on your other side. Give yourself time to discover the benefits of this foundational practice and how it will contribute deeply to a more flowing Pilates practice.

MODIFICATION: If supporting yourself on 1 leg and arm and rotating your torso is very difficult, begin with no turnout of the leg in the air, placing it on a wall for support, keeping your pelvis level. Inhale and lift onto the ball of your standing foot, then exhale, releasing your heel down and connecting your shoulder blades to your internal belly. This will strengthen and lubricate your hip sockets, connecting your body from foot to head and hands.

ADVANCED: Once you feel more fluid in your transitions rotating from side to side on 1 leg, play with your head movement by looking toward your down hand and up hand as you rotate, without losing the ease of reaching through your head, hands and feet. Also, rising onto the ball of your standing foot will further open your foot to your hip-to-spine connection as you rotate.

Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle has a 40-year background and lifelong studies and collaborations with distinguished pioneers in Pilates, yoga, Structural Integration bodywork, somatic arts and sciences and holistic health. Her studies have revolved around the pursuit of illuminating and unifying the universal core principles that underlie Pilates, yoga and all great mind/body practices. This vision honors the way the body senses itself in relationship with the gravitational field, by having us discover that we are deeply intelligent human beings who are self-regulating, self-healing and self-actualizing, just as Joseph Pilates envisioned in Return to Life.

Wendy teaches nationally and internationally, was a founding member of the Pilates Method Alliance, is a second-generation PMA®-CPT and a mentor in Balanced Body's Passing the Torch Mentoring Program. Contact her at www.pilatescenterofaustin.com or via email at info@pilatescenterofaustin.com. To experience more of Wendy's work, visit www.pilatesanytime.com.