Pilates is a mind/body practice that is growing in popularity as a means of developing core strength and stamina. The movements are usually done on a yoga mat, but they can also be done in a chair or at your desk. This session will provide some background on Pilates and how it can complement other mind/body practices such as yoga, tai chi and meditation.

Pilates makes use of isometric movements that strengthen your core and improve your posture without requiring a lot of external movement. We will learn how to activate key muscle groups in the body so that we can feel supported from the inside out. When we find support in the body, we also feel more supported in our mind, which can release stress and tension.

When you practice Pilates, wear comfortable clothing that allows you to breathe freely and move easily. If possible, sit in a chair that is not on wheels or casters so that you feel stable when sitting. Also have a book or yoga block handy. We will use the book or block in the isometric exercises.

**What is Pilates?**

Pilates was created by German physical trainer Joseph Pilates in 1920’s. As a child, Pilates had many physical problems such as rickets that left him weak and unable to live a normal life. Determined to overcome his physical condition, Pilates explored different ways of building strength in the body including various forms of physical training and even circus performing.

Pilates moved with his family to England in 1912. During World War I he worked in a hospital, rehabilitating soldiers. In order to strengthen the soldiers’ bodies after injury he created a new form of exercise that could be done in a bed using bars and straps as resistance to strengthen the core body.

In 1925, Pilates moved to the U.S. and met his wife who was also a teacher of physical movement. Together they founded an exercise study in New York and taught the system that Pilates had used to help strengthen and rehabilitate the wounded soldiers. This system was so effective that it attracted many athletes and dancers. Pilates called his approach “contrology”. By controlling the movement of the body and focusing the mind, Pilates believed that we could all build body awareness, strength and flexibility. After Pilates died, the exercise system was named after him.
Pilates practice continues to evolve today. It consists of a series of controlled movements that use a small range of motion and resistance. The resistance can come through the use of special Pilates equipment or our own bodies. The practice makes use of breath, spinal alignment and deep core muscle activation.

**Pilates Principles**

**Breath:** In Pilates exercises, we breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. The out breath through the mouth engages the core most deeply.

**Position:** Pilates can be done using special exercise equipment designed by Joseph Pilates or on a yoga mat where the body itself creates the resistance. Although Pilates is not normally taught in a chair, the principles can be adapted for that position and used as an aid to everyday movement and postural support.

**Attitude:** As with all mind/body practice, it is important to be open to the practice and to take a non-judgmental attitude towards yourself. Think of the practice as creating body awareness and enjoy the effect of engaging various structures in the body to strengthen and support your posture and movement.

**The Practice**

**Focus the mind:** Begin by closing the eyes and focusing inward. Find a way of sitting that lengthens the spine and allow the crown of the head to lengthen upward. Enjoy the space and opening in the body.

**Breath:**
1. Focusing on the normal breath.
2. Rib breath
3. Experience the effect of the exhalation through the mouth on the core body.
4. Open wide across the chest and draw the shoulder blades together. Feel the openness and space in the heart and lungs.

**Movement in a chair:**
1. Vertical spine lengthening
2. Hinging back
3. Engaging the core
4. Using the breath
5. Extending the arms and side rotation
6. Neck release
7. The Pilates C-curve. Is it right for me?
8. Pilates without the C-curve
9. Engaging the core with block of book between knees
10. Lower spine articulation, also known as cat and dog movements
11. Pilates march
12. Hip opening
13. Leg extensions with flex and point
14. Leg extensions with circles
15. Bent knee circles
16. Bent knee side movements
17. Frog legs
18. Side spirals, shoulder blades release down
19. Rowing
20. Climb a tree
21. Arm rotators
22. Banana stretch
23. Standing mountain
24. Shoulder rolls
25. Rest and restore