

BY APRIL DURRETT

# Empathizing With Clients' Limitations



Pat Massey Welter has walked more than a mile in her customers' shoes.

**SUBJECT:** Pat Massey Welter

**POSITION:** head trainer, manager and co-owner of Suncoast Pilates and Yoga Center, Palm Harbor, Florida

**Attracting a Niche Market.** Many of Pat's clients are in their late 40s–60s. "This age group is attracted to the studio, myself, and our group of trainers, who are all 49 and older; they feel comfortable with us," she says.

**Training Special Populations.** Pat also works with men and women who have chronic health problems. "I train clients with arthritis, fibromyalgia, chronic neck and back pain, osteoporosis and diabetes," she says. "I have worked as a regional program director for the Arthritis Foundation and as a fitness director for physicians and rehab centers," she says. "Plus, I am a type 1 insulin-dependent diabetic myself. Physicians refer their patients to me because they know that I will be able to effectively train them. These referrals give my business an edge, and this type of training helps differentiate me from other trainers in the area."

**Empathy for Her Clients.** Pat truly relates to her clients—and they relate to her—because she has overcome her own physical challenges. "I have kept myself in pretty good shape despite having diabetes,"

she says. "However, I had eye problems a few years ago. As a result of retinal re-attachment surgery gone bad, I did not wake up from the anesthesia. My blood sugar was not monitored properly, and I had a stroke while in a coma. I woke up from the coma with my left side paralyzed and left eyesight lost. I did the rehab myself and now wear a prosthesis in the bad eye. I returned to training as soon as I got the prosthesis. Clients who know what happened believe that if I can go through what I did and look good and keep in shape, then they have much less of a battle to face. They are inspired."

**Inspiring the World to Fitness.** Pat's mother, also a diabetic, died from heart problems related to her diabetes. This fact, combined with the declining health Pat suffered due to an intensive travel schedule as a retail buyer, influenced Pat's becoming a fitness professional. "I couldn't help my mother get healthy, but now I'm able to teach anyone with whom I work that they *can* exercise one way or the other. I create workouts using a combination of methods, including (depending on the client) Pilates—I have used the reformer in my studio for years—weight training, ball and resistance tubing, aquatics and Arthritis Foundation exercise techniques."

Her clients are grateful for her expertise. Judy Hess works with Pat to alleviate symptoms of osteoarthritis in her hip and lower spine. She says of her time with Pat, "My arthritis symptoms have just about

disappeared. My range of motion has improved, my flexibility and strength have increased, my muscle tone has vastly improved, and I am pain-free. Pat understands the requirements of clients with physical limitations, and she enforces the best exercise practices at all times to limit injury and discomfort. I have reached a level of health and physical condition that I thought I would never attain again."

**Biggest Challenge.** Pat can't train as many hours as she would like. "I used to be able to work from 6:00 AM to 8:00 PM, but now my maximum is five clients or classes a day," she says. "That limits what I can do. I get fatigued. The eye prosthesis I wear can get uncomfortable, and I've had to refigure out depth perception. At first I was tentative when I returned to training, but now I know that I'm making a difference and that I have even greater empathy for clients with challenges."

**Why She Loves Her Work.** Pat finds tremendous joy in helping people who don't think they can exercise. "One client who weighs 400-plus pounds told me, 'I feel like Tinkerbell when I'm in your water fitness class.' It's moments like this that inspire me."

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