Principles of the ESSENTRICS™ Program

by Miranda Esmonde-White
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ESSENTRICS TRAINING SERIES INSTRUCTOR MANUAL PRINCIPLES OF THE ESSENTRICS PROGRAM
“If strengthening were the masculine side of fitness, then stretching would be the feminine; they would be the alpha and omega of each other. As the two most basic forces in nature; one cannot exist without the other.”

Miranda Esmonde-White
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THE FLOW OF ENERGY AND MUSCLE CHAINS
In the nineties I was the owner of a fitness center. As such, I was continuously on the lookout for new and exciting fitness programs. There was a lot of recycling of existing aerobics programs; ankle & wrist weights, steps, tae-bo and elastics but ultimately it was still aerobics. Being unable to find an alternative class is what made me decide to create my own program. During those first few months I never dreamed that I was actually creating a program which would touch so many lives.

As a professional ballerina, I was very flexible and had maintained my flexibility all of my adult life. I initially approached stretching from a dancer’s perspective. The type of stretching a professional ballet dancer requires has very little in common with the
needs of average people. A ballet dancers training is extremely painstaking taking years of studio work during which their flexibility and ballet skills are developed simultaneously. The net result of the ballet dancers training is greater strength per pound than any other training with boxing coming in second in the fitness field. The net result of a ballet dancers training is long lean muscles and perfect posture. I wanted to somehow match the training of a ballet dancer in an easy to follow fitness program for average people.

As a former dancer I was distressed that my muscles had become bulky from teaching aerobics. With a personal agenda in mind I set about developing an exercise program to make people’s bodies look like a ballet dancer’s; long, lean and with good posture. I wanted to re-shape my body to look like its former self and thought a program based on the elongating techniques from my ballet years would help achieve my objectives.

Before starting I did a market study on what many disenchanted aerobics clientele were looking for and I interviewed people who had stopped exercising completely. The results of my survey told me that people wanted a non-aggressive workout which flattened their stomachs, got rid of saddlebags and bat wings, strengthened muscles overall, improved posture, as well as having smooth pleasing movements, & beautiful music. Basically they all wanted the ballerina body and so I was on track to try to fulfill theirs and my dream workout. It took me a year or so of experimenting with my students, as well as working with physiotherapists and doctors to finally come up with the basic blueprint of Classical Stretch and Essentrics.

Simultaneously to developing Classical Stretch I suffered from chronic back pain which often left me bed ridden for days at a time as well as costing a fortune in bi-weekly visits to the chiropractor. I integrated many of the movements that the chiropractor did during treatments into my “new” stretch program. In my first month teaching Classical Stretch a faithful group of students joined me for three classes a week. We observed two startling changes that first month: almost everybody lost a pant size, and also as exciting was the back pain relief for me and several other participants.

Word spread about the amazing new workout and I found myself unable to keep up with the demand for all the new classes. I trained several teachers but still couldn’t keep up with demand. I realised that I had stumbled upon what I thought of as the “new aerobics”.

In a very short time I was head-hunted by the Canadian National Sports Federation who had heard about my unique flexibility technique. I began training many Canadian elite Olympic athletes from a wide roster of sports. It was a thrill for me as many of the athletes I personally trained won Olympic medals and world championships making my program even more popular and giving it more acclaim and credibility among athletes and sports teams.
Another major event happened in the Classical Stretch world. The same month I started training athletes, PBS the American television network picked up Classical Stretch as a TV series for national distribution. This meant filming 30 shows. The challenge was enormous. I'm proud to say that I managed to pull it off that first year and have been carried nationally on PBS since 1999. To date we have filmed over 200 different Classical Stretch episodes which have aired on average over 25,000 times each year in various American markets.

My peaceful life changed in a matter of months from running a relaxed dance and fitness center to training Olympians, world Champions, hosting a national TV show, filming DVD's and a great deal of traveling giving lectures and workshops.

That was a busy time in my life half sweet half sour as I was diagnosed with breast cancer during the same busy year. Between the contrasting worlds of healing from cancer and building Classical Stretch I was worried my energy wouldn’t survive, but it did. The expression, “when it rain it pours” really related to that period of my life!

BUILDING ESSENTRICS

During the time I was developing Classical Stretch, my daughter Sahra finished a health economics degree and started working in the pharmaceutical industry. She encouraged her co-workers to do Classical Stretch DVD’s. Soon we had long a list of testimonials from young women whose bodies dramatically changed shape from the workouts. Though she’d been working with me behind the scenes, much to my joy it wasn’t long before Sahra joined full time.

At the time she was doing her Masters in Public Health and had chosen to study the effects of my exercise program on health. She analyzed the program and identified that we actually had three similar yet significantly different programs, which were to become Classical Stretch, sports specific flexibility and Essentrics.

We also had three separate groups doing the program; baby boomers, 18 to 35yr olds and athletes. My baby-boomer clientele viewed their version of the program as an eclectic mix of objectives from improving their health and increasing their flexibility to toning their bodies. The athletes viewed their sports specific workout as a deep stretch program, which also relieved their pain and improved their performance. While the 18 to 35 yr olds saw what they were doing as a toning and slenderizing workout with just a touch of pain relief. We realised that we actually had three very different programs; one for baby-boomers integrating stretch, strengthening and general health, one for athletes for deep stretching and pain relief and one for a younger clientele for strengthening and body toning.

Our challenge was to name and identify each program. We already had the name Classical Stretch for the baby-boomers program, which was familiar to the PBS viewership. The ‘classical’ part of the name was intended to reflect the pure lines identified in classical architecture and painting which are the same pure classic lines
we are trying to achieve with the Classical Stretch body. Baby-boomers related to the name Classical Stretch but their daughters didn’t! After 10 years of making TV shows and DVD’s under the name Classical Stretch, we had discovered that mothers were willing to do the same fitness programs as their daughters; however daughters were reluctant to do the same fitness programs as their mothers. In order to reach the daughters we had to offer them their own program with a modern youthful name.

The way we discovered the name Essentrics was through kinesiology (which is the science of movement). Knowing that we were using a version of eccentric training (which is the scientific term for the exact type of specific strength training we are using) as the foundation of our program, we tweaked the spelling of the word to become Essentrics. Suddenly we had a modern name with an exciting edginess’ that resonated with the younger market.

THE RIDDLE OF ESSENTRICS AS STRETCHING & STRENGTHENING

Essentrics is a strengthening program! It tones the muscles in lengthened positions, not short positions as do most fitness programs. In Essentrics we lengthen the muscles by pulling the joints into elongated positions while they are being strengthened; the simultaneous lengthening and strengthening is what makes the muscles more flexible.

When the muscles are toned with a flexed joint (as in a bicep-curl), the bicep muscle will shorten as it strengthens, however if we strengthen our arm with the elbow straight the bicep will lengthen as it strengthens. When the muscles are lengthened while being toned that increases their flexibility. Ballet dancers are the perfect example of this; visualise a ballet dancers legs in a high arabesque. The combined action of lifting (weight lifting their leg) and elongating strengthens the muscles while increasing their flexibility.

When I first began to work on this program I too was still under the illusion that stretching was a separate concept from strengthening and that I was developing a pure stretching program. Because of my own initial ignorance, I am not surprised that most people are equally ignorant.

It seems like a riddle to say that correct or effective stretching is actually strengthening, as the concepts are seemingly polar opposites. Stretching lengthens and strengthening shortens, however when you put them together you get both; longer and stronger muscles. As fitness professionals, most trainers recognise that the lean, fit look is what most women want.
In the fitness industry it is well recognised that strengthening is essential to maintaining health and power, while stretching is considered less essential and used basically for pain relief but almost never for body shaping. Clients are told that they should stretch but most believe that they can live without it. Or so the accepted thinking has been up until now. That's because we were never given the option of both!

With Essentrins we are asking people to rethink their concept of stretching. It’s a brain teaser to start looking at flexibility as strengthening because we’ve been so conditioned to think of these two concepts as separate and polar opposites.

KNOW THE SHAPE YOU WILL GET

As a fitness professional, you need to be a guide to your clients, educating them on the body shape they will develop from different fitness and sports programs. I will tell you exactly what type of body shape clients can expect from Essentrins. As fitness professionals it is important that we guide them honestly.

Before starting to participate in a stretching or body toning program, a student needs to be asked: What do they want to look like? (Most people do care how they look.) When asked, most women say they want to become thinner and more defined, they usually want to get rid of under-arm flab, and bulging outer thighs and almost everyone wants to flatten their stomach and improve their posture. What they’re really asking for is an Essentrins body!

After a client tells me what they want to look like, I then suggest that they look around at the bodies of people doing various programs & sports and chose the body they want. This is not scientific but it gives them a fair idea of how each program shapes the body. It’s important to recognise that every program develops a body’s shape differently. I’ve known too many people unpleasantly surprised to find that their posture has been destroyed and their body has become bulky while they’ve been faithfully working out at the gym. To avoid disappointment we have to guide our clients into the exact program that they are looking for.

Essentrins has been designed to be a body-sculpting program; created to elongate the legs, hips, stomach, arms, neck, and shoulders, improve the posture, slenderize the shoulders, lengthen the pectorals and upper backs, open the chest and elongate the neckline, slenderize the love handles, and eliminate under arm-flab. After a few weeks of intense Essentrins, a measuring tape and a camera will show the changes in the length and shape of the muscles, while many clients lose a pant size.
Prior to Essentrics, instructors had only one viable training option for strengthening and sculpting the muscles; that being concentric training. Anyone in the fitness industry knows that stretching can not be used as a body sculpting program. Essentrics, as a combination of strengthening and stretching, is revolutionary in the body shaping business.

BEST RESTING: HOW TO JUDGE POTENTIAL FLEXIBILITY

In aerobics, the measure in which we judge our students level of fitness is by their heart rate. In Essentrics it’s not so easy. The potential flexibility of clients’ muscles can not be judged on a standard flexibility test, as everyone has different potentials. The differences are mainly due to the ratio of skeletal muscle (muscle fibres) to tendon. There is however a yardstick that we can use to judge a clients potential; that yardstick is called ‘best resting’.

First we have to look at the make-up of a muscle. The muscle is really two things; one, the actual skeletal muscle organ which is made up of millions of filaments of myosin and actin protein strands bundled together and two, tendons which are made of fibrous connective tissue which attaches the muscles to the bones.

The skeletal muscle which is made up of millions of myosin and actin protein strands, has the ability to contract (roughly 25%) and extend (roughly 60% to 75%) as the muscle is strengthened (contracted) or elongated (stretched). Tendons on the other hand are made of fibrous connective tissue and have a limited flexibility range of between 4% and 6%.

Tendons are very stiff while muscles are very supple. When judging flexibility potential we have to look at the ratio of tendon length to muscle length. Some people have proportionately less muscle to tendon ratio then others. The ratio of muscle to tendon length is the most important feature in judging flexibility potential. The greater the length of the muscle in relationship to the length of the tendon will indicate that the person will have a enhanced flexibility potential.

Best resting is the neutral point before a person begins to move. Once a person begins to move their muscles will start contracting or lengthening. It indicates their neutral or resting level of flexibility prior to doing any significant exercise. If a person has a very limited range of motion then you can assume that their tendon to muscle ratio is high. You can also assume that the person will never achieve great flexibility. If on the other hand they show a significant range of motion at their best resting position, then you can assume their tendon to muscle ratio is low and that the person will be able to gain significant flexibility.
Best resting is dependant on several factors; genetic disposition, age, level of fitness, ration of tendon to muscle length and type of training. However no amount of flexibility training can change the reality of high tendon to muscle ratio. The most realistic aspiration that the person can hope for is to achieve their own maximum flexibility. Many people will never be able to do the splits but they will definitely be able to gain some degree of increased range of motion.

When starting Essentrics, most people want to know how much flexibility they could realistically expect to achieve. Everybody has the ability to gain some degree of flexibility, but no two people are alike. It is widely accepted in kinesiology that the average person can gain between 60% to 75% additional flexibility from their point of best resting, and contract their muscles 25%. Best resting is a valuable tool to judge where a persons potential could be. If the best resting is very limited then the likelihood of gaining extreme flexibility is slim. However a person with a reasonable degree of flexibility at best resting is likely to gain a considerable degree over several months of Essentrics.

The objective in doing flexibility exercises is to become more flexible, if the person does a daily flexibility workout they will change their best-resting point. The same is true for strength training; where the starting or best resting point becomes shorter. Theoretically with daily workouts the muscles become slightly shorter (stronger) or slightly longer (more flexible) then the previous day. The degree of change is dependant on the type of training. Best resting is not a judge of the look or strength of the muscle, but only the muscles ability to use the full range of 75% for flexibility or 25% for strength.
Knowing how to use best resting helps us as fitness instructors judge how to safely train a client and monitor their maximum potential. Best resting is a guide to potential flexibility, and what people should realistically strive towards and expect to achieve.

THE FLOW OF ENERGY AND MUSCLE CHAINS

In Essentrics we try to follow the natural chains of muscles while exercising. Not only does following the natural chains of the muscles feel soothing, but it also feels very natural and easy to do. The reason it feels easier is because the body is following an instinctive flow. The movements in Essentrics are designed to deliberately follow the natural chains of the muscles. This also gives the impression that the movements follow continuous circular or rotational type motions.

There are several benefits to deliberately following the muscle chains. One is psychological, leaving the participant with a sense of well-being and peace. In other words, the movements are in harmony with what the body wants to do and how the body wants to flow. At the end of an Essentrics workout, participants often say that they feel relaxed and contented, even though they have just finished a rigorous workout.

The fitness value gained from following the muscle chains is as great a value as the emotional one. A chain implies a series of connecting links, or in this case connecting muscles. If one muscle along the chain is weaker, tighter or in any way off balance from the others, then all of the muscles along the chain will be affected. That is why a foot injury can cause hip problems, or an arm injury can cause shoulder problems. The concept of following the invisible natural chains of muscles is part of the basic philosophy behind Essentrics which is to rebalance the entire body. It is partly why this is such a successful workout from a fitness point of view.