

Sensory Props for Older Clients
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Sensory props can be valuable to the dance/movement therapist; any prop that stimulates the tactile, vestibular and proprioception systems are sensory in nature and contribute to how our bodies receive and process new information, therefore helping adults and children who have difficulties with bilateral motor coordination, sequencing, balance, posture tonicity, and spatial orientation. When you use sensory props during your movement sessions, your clients will end up feeling more relaxed and receptive to change. They will look forward to coming back for more and continue their movement practice at home.

For the purposes of this article we will look at programming options for the medium molding-style ball (8-10"), and the full bodied resistance Stretch-eze® band. These props have been particularly effective with baby boomers whose bodies are beginning to show signs of age, such as slower muscle and skeletal response to new activity. Also, life long postural inequalities are manifesting in back, hip, or knee issues. For many boomers, there is also a need for more resistance exercise to combat loss of bone density.

The props

Let's look at the Stretch-eze band first. This versatile piece of equipment is a stretchy loop that a client can wrap around the entire body or use in place of a yoga strap or resistance band for additional support or assistance.

Wrap this soft, circular, nylon/lycra/spandex band around the shoulders and feet to provide resistance during Pilates and Yoga warm-up exercises. The deep upper and lower body pressure makes the client feel snug and supported. It also provides neuromuscular feedback helpful to correct body misalignment during exercises such as the hundreds, the roll-down, roll over, and the teaser. While lying supine, wrap the band around the shoulders and feet, with the ball behind the head. This recruits the underused core musculature and relaxes the overused neck and psoas muscles for your older clients who complain of a sore neck and shoulders.

The Stretch-eze can also be wrapped around the insteps, providing hamstring/psoas resistance during the single straight leg exchange, and abductor/adductor resistance during straddle scissor crosses. This simultaneously challenges and supports hip range of motion which can be compromised in later years. Using the elastic resistance increases muscle elasticity and builds ligament and tendon strength which later can prevent falls and/or hip replacements

Here is one specific exercise to try. Lie prone. First place the band across the insteps with bent knees and hold the band with your hands. Use it to pull feet towards the sit bones to stretch the thighs. This is a great tool when someone cannot reach their feet due to tight low back or quadriceps. For upper and lower back extension, press the feet into support

while pressing hands/arms straight forward lifting upper back and legs into a balanced arched stretch. Arching with the support of the band simultaneously stretches and contracts the back muscles and is also known as resistance stretching originally developed by Bob Cooley. Pressing into the resistance of the band while stretching, creates eccentric muscle contraction. For the aging body, there is less stress on the joints and is a more gradual and gentle way to improve strength and flexibility.

Be creative in discovering more ways to employ the support and resistance of this band. There are many different ways to include this type of band into almost any individual dance/movement therapy session. You can also use it between two people in relationship work for trust building, reciprocity, and tension release.

The Ball

I use a medium, molding-style ball (8-10") both with the Stretch-eze, and on its own. It can create a sense of buoyancy and fluidity throughout the body, increasing sensory feedback and overall enjoyment of exercising and movement. Lordosis and/or kyphosis become more pronounced as we age. Using the ball at the sacrum or between the shoulder blades can heighten awareness and help fire the agonist muscles needed for postural alignment.

Starting with the ball under the sacrum is a great way to begin a session. Perform the starter 360 degree Pilates clock exercise. This brings awareness to the pelvic floor and reinforces the integral relationship between the low back and transverse abdominals before finding and asserting neutral spine. Another use for the ball at the sacrum is during double leg lowering, since the pressure not only helps to find one's natural low back curvature, but also helps recruit the transverse and rectus abdominal muscles without overusing the psoas.

To open and release the ribs, lie supine with the ball between the shoulder blades. Stretch over it to feel the upper back extension. Remove the ball and then work on rib cage stabilization while performing slow arm circles.

Here is one of my favorite exercises on the ball. Fill the ball to about three-quarters capacity. Lie prone. Place it under the forehead/hairline and line up the head with the cervical spine. Positioning the ball here while doing a set of prone exercises helps to keep good alignment, prevents static, tension-producing positioning and encourages awareness of the head as a fluid extension of the spine. This adapting quality contributes to maintaining one's best posture regardless of standing, sitting, or participating in a chosen activity.

Using sensory props with aging clients will increase their ability to adapt and refine their movements so that they may achieve the powerful benefits of dance/movement therapy without soreness. They will leave your group or individual session with a sense of expansion, positivity, alertness, and strength.