

melt[®] STRESS AWAY

revitalize your aching body and deepen your pilates work with this simple but innovative method **BY DIANA WHITNEY**

After 15 years as a professional dancer, Jenna Stewart knew how to push through pain. “I had scoliosis, I had two herniated discs, and I’d also had a C-section. I’d always been in a lot of pain,” admits the L.A.-based personal trainer and event planner.

Then, at a fitness convention in Anaheim, CA, in June 2009, she happened upon the M.E.L.T. Method[®], a proactive self-treatment technique for pain-free living, performed with rollers and small balls. MELT’s creator, exercise physiologist and manual therapist Sue Hitzmann, describes her simple self-care method as “hands-off bodywork™.” Stewart sat riveted through Hitzmann’s eight-hour workshop, “New Science of the Human Body,” and immediately booked a flight to New York for the MELT instructor training that fall.

Today Stewart teaches everyone she knows how to MELT—her clients, her parents, professional dancers and ballet students. And she enjoys an active life as a superfit mom and entrepreneur, free

of discomfort and fatigue. “I’ve spent so much money over the years on chiropractors, massage, yoga—you name it,” she says. “MELT works, and it’s affordable. I get up in the morning, and if my back’s out, I can decompress my back.

exercise, stress and aging.

MELT, a serendipitous acronym for Myofascial Energetic Length Technique, is a natural complement to Pilates because it improves your flexibility, body awareness, mobility and posture while enhancing the results of exercise. You can MELT your body on a foam roller before Pilates practice, as many instructors are now doing with their clients,

and release trapped tension while deepening the connection to your core. “MELT prepares the body for a Pilates session,”



Creator Sue Hitzmann teaching a packed room of MELT devotees in Manhattan, May 2010. Inset: a MELT ball.



BRAN LEIGHTON

Then I can go work out.”

If you’ve ever experienced craniosacral therapy or another healing art that works on the body’s subtle energies, you know what it’s like to lie on a table and feel a blissful sense of balance. Maybe you’ve wished you could re-create this sensation for yourself. The MELT Method gives you the tools to do just that: rebalance your body and relieve common aches and pains associated with active living,

says Hitzmann. “Your joints are more aligned, and you’re more in touch with your body.”

You can also MELT as a goal unto itself in a group class or a private session, as an alternative to hands-on bodywork. But the beauty of MELT is that you can do it at home, every day, as a form of self-care. The MELT hand and foot treatments are simple techniques performed with small (one- to three-inch-diameter) balls. After 15

minutes of rolling, “shearing” and “rinsing” your feet and hands, you feel calm and relaxed, and your body tingles with fresh energy.

everything is connected

Unlike Yamuna® Body Rolling, which works as a self-massage to stretch and elongate the muscles, the MELT Method addresses the neurofascial system, the body’s connective tissue and nervous system. Fascia creates a seamless web throughout the body, covering and connecting every muscle, bone, organ and nerve. In anatomy-dissection lab, fascia is the whitish packing stuff that medical students are told to clean off before examining the red muscles and tendons. For decades, fascia has been dismissed as mere packing material, but new research reveals that it contains active contractile cells and plays a key role in musculoskeletal behavior.

“Only recently has science recognized the importance of fascia in many aspects of health—like posture, movement, body perception and back pain,” says Robert Schleip, PhD, director of the Fascia Research Project at Ulm University in Germany. “I believe Pilates instructors can benefit from working with the fascial network.” In a recent paper in the *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, Schleip proposes that fascia is in fact a rich sensory organ. “There is an exceptionally large amount of neural feedback information coming from the sensory factors in the myofascia,” he writes. Consequently, the therapeutic effects of bodywork techniques (including self-treatment like MELT) may come from “an immediate neurological response from the connective tissue.”

Schleip became a fan of MELT after experiencing a treatment at the skilled hands of Sue Hitzmann. “I was deeply impressed by the positive results,” he says. “MELT appears to affect tissue hydration by squeezing old fluids out of



Doing the knuckle decompression to reduce inflammation in a student’s arthritic finger, Jan. 2010.

fascial tissues and allowing fresh water molecules and nutrients to be soaked up, giving the tissues a more elastic, juicy quality.”

While fascia may look like fibrous white webbing, it actually exhibits fluid behavior. Fascia is composed mainly of a fluid material called ground substance, along with the proteins collagen and elastin, says Donald Scheumann in *The Balanced Body: A Guide to Deep Tissue and Neuromuscular Therapy*. Chemically, ground substance is the same liquid as the interstitial fluid bathing every cell of the body. It is a gel-like substance, capable of moving between a more fluid and more solid state; greater fluidity means freer muscle tissue and ease of movement.

Hitzmann developed MELT’s primary techniques based on the fluid properties of fascia. “Shearing” is a luscious rubbing on balls and rollers that creates a friction against the connective tissue, stimulating localized cellular fluid exchange. Then, the long, slow MELT “rinsing” technique sets off a fluid motion that should naturally be present in healthy myofascial tissue. When you stimulate tissues in specific areas, says Hitzmann, it initiates movement in the bodywide matrix of fascia, beginning at

the superficial layers just under the skin. This way, rolling your feet on a small ball can drive connective tissue fluids back up the spine.

Like other renowned experts on fascia, Hitzmann believes chronic dehydration of the connective tissue is the root of many common ailments, such as migraines and low back pain. The fascia loses its fluidity through the stressors of daily life and aging, becoming stagnant and stiff, like a dried-up sponge. The solution isn’t simply to drink more water. We’re talking about *cellular* dehydration here, as witnessed in the aging process: we wrinkle, we shrink, we ache, and our joints compress. Drinking water is crucial, but it isn’t enough. Hitzmann says we must stimulate the tissues in a particular way to rehydrate, MELTing them on the rollers and balls she’s designed specifically to simulate her hands-on healing therapies.

According to Hitzmann, sitting at a desk, lifting a toddler, running a marathon—even Pilates—create tension in the body that gets trapped in the fascia. The do-it-yourself techniques of the MELT Method release this tension as they rehydrate the connective tissue, decompress the joints and quiet the nervous system.

rinse and repeat

All MELT sessions follow a basic formula: self-assess, MELT, reassess. In a group class, students tell the MELT instructor about any aches and pains, and the teacher uses a template of specific sequences, called a MELT map, to help them.

To self-assess, you lie on your back with your palms face up and notice how your body rests on the floor. Using proprioception, or your innate body awareness, you feel the weight of your head, shoulders, rib cage and pelvis, and learn to identify the “masses and spaces” (the back of the skull is a “mass”; behind the neck is a “space”). This “reconnect” technique heightens the mind-body connection. “Reconnecting taps into your autopilot, the part that’s naturally supporting and stabilizing you,” explains Hitzmann. The autopilot is a simplified term for the neurofascial system, connective tissue and autonomic nervous system, which Schleip and other researchers propose are in communication, working outside of our conscious control. Together these two systems provide balance in the body.

If you are following a MELT map for neck pain, for example, you com-



Neck decompression

plete your assessment by gently turning your head from side to side, noticing if you have any pain or stiffness or whether your shoulders move when your neck does. Then you’re ready to release. Your MELT map continues



Rib-cage lengthening

with neck decompression on the soft roller. Traditional exercise rollers are made of hard foam, but Hitzmann has developed a very soft, durable roller to maximize body awareness and create less pressure for her older clients. You place the MELT roller behind your head and neck, keeping the base of the skull on the top of the roller. One of the principles of MELT is that you never MELT the spaces (only the masses).

Next you perform the “shearing” technique by slowly turning your head left to right, creating small circles or head nods on each side, bringing vital fluids back into the base of the skull. If the fascia is like a dried-out sponge, shearing gets the sponge wet, returning the connective tissue to a fluid state,

allowing it to absorb water and nutrients. After shearing, you move the roller higher up the head and nod the head slowly to lengthen the neck. Now reassess. Return to your initial position lying flat on your back,

palms up, and notice if your neck space is more distinct. Turn your neck side to side and notice if you feel less pain and more balance. If you do, you’ve successfully decompressed your top two cervical vertebrae!

Another way to decrease neck pain and stiffness is to increase your rib cage mobility.

MELT rib cage lengthening feels incredible, a delicious massage for the spine. As always, you start by self-assessing: Place the roller at your bra line and try to extend the ribs back over it, moving only from the rib mass. This is harder than it sounds, even for the naturally flexible. Next, you side-bend your ribs along the roller, assessing your lateral range of motion. Now you shear the spine by pointing your elbows to the ceiling, raising your hips and rubbing the spine against the roller in between your shoulder blades. As you gently glide your body forward and back, keep your core engaged and massage your upper back to bring fluids back to the joints between each vertebrae.

Finally, “rinsing” brings the fluids down the spine. Keeping your abs engaged and your pelvis stable, you slowly roll the spine down the roller, from your shoulder blades to your ribs. Now you’re ready to reassess. First, place the roller at your bra line and extend the ribs back over it, and side-bend again. Has your mobility increased? Then, return to your initial position lying flat on your back, palms up. Your upper back should feel weighted to the ground, and your head more centered.

When you sense improvements and whole-body changes, your autopilot receives the information and returns to

how to practice at home

When the MELT kit arrived in the mail, my inner skeptic rolled her eyes. Were these six little rubber balls (two soft and squishy, four firm) really going to help my aching low back? Like most fitness lovers, I prioritize my Pilates, yoga and aerobic workouts and neglect my hands and feet. After two decades of being crammed into running shoes and tight ski boots, my feet were begging for some TLC.

The first time I stood on the small, firm ball, I wanted to cry. How could I not have known my feet were so tender? It was a delicious soreness, though, and it sweetened as I rolled my heels and arches on the large ball. Hitzmann told me that the

foot treatment alleviates low back pain by bringing vital fluids from the feet to the spine, stimulating the natural physiological process of fascial fluid exchange and renewal. "As the fluid motion returns to the S.I. joint, it creates mobility and freedom of the low-back bones," she says.

After MELTing, my feet felt fuller and more relaxed, and my whole body released. I could fold down and place my palms on the floor with ease. Now I MELT every night while I brush my teeth: It's like getting a mini-reflexology treatment in the bathroom. It calms my nervous system so I sleep better, and yes, my tweaky back is realigned, too.

a balanced state more quickly next time. MELTing increases your ability to maintain postural alignment and body efficiency, so less neck compression

Camp on ESPN2. She posed (albeit as a body double) on the cover of *Muscle and Fitness* magazine, and her Crunch Boot Camp Training video sold more

child, so exceptional that her father often warned her, "Don't tell people what you know." Her intuition has enhanced her extensive education and years of research in somatic healing. After receiving a masters degree in applied anatomy and physiology from NYU, she spent years studying hands-on modalities like neuromuscular therapy, lymphatic drainage and craniosacral therapy. A gifted manual therapist, Hitzmann developed a reputation for being able to "heal" challenging conditions and drew to her a large roster of people suffering from migraines, back pain, incontinence and TMJ.

Ironically, though, she couldn't take advantage of her own healing touch, and she sought to find a way to integrate it into a self-care technique. "One day I decompressed my own neck using a roller," she says. "Then I started doing it with my clients. Suddenly they could hold my treatments longer and didn't need them weekly." Her annual client list rose from 30 to 300, and it was during this time that she stumbled upon the science of connective tissue.

"I realized I could feel the different vibrations of the tissue under the skin," she says. "I was palpating my clients, and movement would come back to that tissue." In 2000 Hitzmann embarked on a quest to create a specific technique that would address the neurofascial system. She began to delve further into myofascial research, performing dozens



occurs during all your daily activities.

"MELT concepts are simulating what I do as a hands-on practitioner—light touch techniques that work on the fluids of the body," says Hitzmann. "If you really want to make a difference in your body, it's better to do it in a more subtle way, so you don't overstimulate the stress reflex."

i'll stop the world and melt with you

Hitzmann's blazing start in the fitness industry was anything but subtle. She taught her first aerobics class at age 16 and went on to host Crunch Boot

than half a million copies worldwide and to this day remains one of the all-time top-selling exercise videos.

But at age 27, Hitzmann experienced an excruciating case of plantar fasciitis that went on for months. Traditional physical therapy offered no relief, and she found herself icing four times a day and crawling to the bathroom in agony each morning, unable to put weight on the foot. Miraculously, when Hitzmann tried craniosacral therapy to treat a different injury, her heel pain disappeared. "Craniosacral work was a calling for me," she says. "It completely changed my view of how pain arises in the body."

Hitzmann had been an intuitive

of dissections with Gil Hedley, PhD, and attending the First International Fascia Research Congress at Harvard in 2007. After years of working with thousands of people individually and refining the method in a group setting, MELT was born.

Now, at age 39, Hitzmann is radiant, energetic and pain-free, a poster child for her own MELT Method. “I MELT every day, and I don’t have pain in my body,” she says. “Honestly, I look and feel better now than I did in my 20s. My knees used to creak and crack, but I’m much more active now because I simply have less pain.” As a bonus, she says MELT has given her the gifts of youthful, well-hydrated skin and the ability to sleep deeply.

the missing link

Today, Hitzmann has trained scores of MELT instructors, leads workshops nationwide and in March practiced MELT on leading research scientists at the Fascia Research Congress in Ulm. Meanwhile, Pilates instructors around the country are discovering MELT’s benefits. Hallee Altman, a second-generation Pilates instructor and owner of the Center Studio on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, incorporates MELT as both a preparation for Pilates and part of the curriculum. Altman has nine instructors working for her at the studio, and five of them are certified in MELT.

“MELT has given me more tools in my toolbox. It helps me figure out a client’s body,” says Altman, who received her Pilates training from Romana Kryzanowska. Together with Hitzmann, she developed a mat class series called MELT on Pilates. “I keep the authentic mat order,” she says. “I love it the way Romana taught it to

me. But we use the half-roller as a prop and integrate the MELT techniques into the sequence.” The MELT Method sold itself at the Center Studio. “All my clients were asking for it,” Altman explains. “They’d say, ‘Can we do a little MELT before we get on the Reformer?’”

Many Pilates instructors open their sessions with MELT. “All my mat classes start out with MELTing,” says Christine Purdy of Barefoot Bay, FL. “It helps my students bring the work from the deep, rooted core.” Purdy has her students do the Hundred and a few mat exercises, stop and MELT, then go

back and repeat the same exercises. “Because of the MELT mixed in, they’re getting a tremendous amount of work in the proper form,” she says.

Other instructors use MELT at the close of a Pilates workout. “I always finish by releasing the S.I. joint lying on the roller with the low-

back decompression technique,” says Dunlap, a classical Pilates instructor at Avenue Pilates in Delray Beach, FL. In the field of fitness for more than 40 years, Carla won the prestigious Miss Olympia award in 1983. Now she shudders to remember life before MELT: “If you don’t address the dehydration in the fascia over a lifetime, it’s like being wrapped in Saran wrap.”

The world of sports medicine is quickly warming up to MELT as well. Benjamin Domb, MD, an orthopedic surgeon and neuromusculoskeletal specialist in Westmont, IL, tried MELTing after a 2007 surfing accident left him with a painful, swollen leg. Hitzmann showed Domb how to use the MELT roller and the foot treatment, and the healing was immediate.

“Sue’s techniques calm the stress



BRIAN LEIGHTON

Sue Hitzmann

Get MELT’ed

Want to find a MELT class or private instruction near you? Sixty-two MELT instructors are teaching in 12 states, with new teachers graduating every season. The MELT Method also offers workshops, intensive series, immersions, retreats and comprehensive teacher trainings. To learn more about MELT’s approach to pain-free fitness, visit meltmethod.com.

reflex and rejuvenate whole-body movement in just minutes a day,” Domb explains. “MELT actually feels good while you do it and gives you great immediate changes, not to mention a lasting benefit. Most people who I recommend MELT to continue to do it long after their injuries have healed. I believe it has true potential to decrease recovery time after injuries.”

Another sports-medicine expert, Polly De Mille, RN, works as a nurse and clinical exercise physiologist at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan. She’s also an advanced MELT instructor and a personal trainer who’s certified in Pilates. “When I discovered MELT, it seemed like the missing link. We stretch, we strengthen, we do cardio, but we need to do more,” she says. MELT made sense to her both professionally and personally, since she’s a triathlete who pounds on her body.

“MELT is amazing on a basic maintenance level,” De Mille claims. “How many people have the time and money to go to manual therapy regularly?” In a belt-tightening recession, spending 15 minutes on self-care may be a smart choice for all of us.

Vermont-based Diana Whitney is a freelance writer, vinyasa yoga teacher and mother of two.