



**FIND
YOUR
CENTER**

**CENTER
YOUR
LIFE**

Larkin Barnett's inward centering technique, which can be done anytime, anywhere, requires just your breath and your core to help make you more fully present, face stress head-on, and take control of your body and mind for anything life throws at you.

By Larkin Barnett • Edited by Amanda Altman

When I was 14, I lost my parents and my house, and had to move away from my hometown. My parents died independently, each at the age of 40, due to stress-related circumstances. As you can imagine, their deaths were extremely traumatic events in my life. The wind was literally and figuratively knocked out of me.

It wasn't until later, as I pursued a dance major in college, that it became clear I had developed an unhealthy, unconscious habit of shallow chest breathing. Unlike the other dancers, I couldn't catch my breath, and I didn't have the same muscular endurance. That's when I said to myself, *This isn't going to take me down*. I was going to figure out a way to take care of my true home—my body.

After graduation, long before core training became popular, I started working in the fitness industry. I discovered that my students were moving primarily from their limbs, not from their center, like I learned to do during my dance training. How could I help them move from their center in class and in life?

My late father, a physician, left behind anatomy transparencies of the layers of the human body, which allowed me to begin researching the contractile ability of the abdominal muscle group. And when I went back to school for my master's degree, my professors insisted upon anatomy-based visual imagery, which reinforced my knowledge. Soon, the Barnett Formula™—a five-step internal core practice—was born.

After 34 years of research, development and teaching my Formula, I've observed transformation at every level, from the hospital bed to the Olympic athlete. I often say that my clients move through, instead of get

through, challenges, therapy, performance and life by choosing to mentally activate their deepest core potential. They inspire me.

So, how does it work? The Formula teaches you to see, feel and believe that your abdominals can secure themselves to your spine to provide protection for your whole body. While the abdominal muscle group contracts as a unit to produce movement, you'll learn to "isolate" each of the four layers. The contractions build layer-upon-layer because you're also tightening the muscles between the steps.

Visualizing the distinct layers having a unique directional course is where your complete concentration must go and stay. To really move the deep abdominals takes a "constant" razor-like, inward focus; cultivating the ability to "look deep within" the body is the key to experiencing your full core potential.

In Pilates, we learn that the "scoop" of the abs goes into the spine and toward the crown of the head, but the Formula goes deeper. Yes, the abs go in and up, and there is a squeezing sensation, but the Formula, which I developed 18 years before discovering Pilates, allows access to the full contractile ability of the abs. My approach cultivates the ultimate

"inward-shaping capabilities" of your deep core muscles to elastically "fill up" spaces created inside your body through expansive breathing and trunk elongation. It helps you dynamically interweave the muscle fibers in specific directions—all while moving them into the spine.

When the Formula becomes part of your daily regimen and you're faced with a sudden crisis, fear or pain, you'll instinctively shift inward to manage anxiety, especially seemingly uncontrollable anxiety. This active inward centering can help everything from severe pain and fear, to test-taking, speaking engagements and airplane jitters all the way to athletic performance. (For real-life examples, see "A Core Awakening" on page 75.)

I'm often asked if this breathing and ab work eventually becomes second nature. The answer is a resounding no. You don't want it to be automatic—it's important to stay aware and clear. We have the power to manipulate breathing and core contractions to our advantage. I'd like to argue that breath is our untapped health resource, as well as the bridge between our involuntary and voluntary systems. Most of us operate primarily from our stressed-out sympathetic fight or flight nervous system, which contributes to many health problems; conscious breathing has been proven to boost our parasympathetic calming response. You can build a sound structure along with a centering strategy, which can fill even the most stressful moment with a sense that "all is well."

Practice the Formula while stuck in traffic or at your desk, at the gym or during sports, even while doing chores and errands. The more you use it to awaken and cultivate a powerful core, the more you'll learn to live a life that's truly centered. **PS**

THE FORMULA TEACHES YOU TO SEE, FEEL AND BELIEVE THAT YOUR ABDOMINALS CAN SECURE THEMSELVES TO YOUR SPINE TO PROVIDE PROTECTION FOR YOUR WHOLE BODY.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALAN COX; MAKEUP BY JESSICA CHYNOWETH AND HAIR BY SARA COLLEY; LARKIN'S TOP BY LULULEMON, BOTTOMS BY UNDER ARMOUR

THE BARNETT FORMULA

PURPOSE: isolates each abdominal layer to help access the predominantly dormant deep structural core muscles; helps to manage stress, anxiety and pain; improves stability and mobility of the spine; enhances conscious efficient breathing; reduces inflammation while improving circulation; sculpts the trunk, waistline and hips; increases endurance and strength to move heavy objects; serves as a habitual tool to promote calmness and mental clarity; enhances practical centering to help you be more fully present anytime, anywhere

BREATHING GUIDELINES:

- Breathe in and out through both your mouth and nose.
- On the inhalation, direct the air into your lungs to feel the expansion along your shoulder blades/middle/lower back and chest. (No air enters your belly because your abdominal muscles are inwardly shaping and tightening.)
- Don't simply hold the abdominals tight. Instead, keep wringing them out on the inhale and on the exhale.

STEP 1

This first step addresses all four layers of the abdominals and the hip flexors.

WHAT TO DO: Inhale, then exhale, picturing and feeling your four abdominal muscle layers, and the stabilizers behind them, inwardly spiral onto your spine. Don't relax your abs. (Optional: Allow your arms to mimic this corkscrewing of your abs onto your spine.)

WHAT TO IMAGINE:

- Your deepest abs "tornado" your outer abs onto your spine.
- The dynamic action of a wave pulling back out to sea, as the muscles close and compress your ribs and hip bones to your spine.



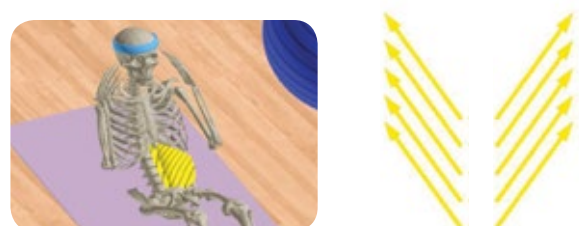
STEP 3

Layer three delves into the internal oblique abdominals.

WHAT TO DO: Inhale, then exhale, picturing and feeling your abdominals diagonally interlinking from the base of your hips—and then in, back and up along your ribs—into a V shape. Don't relax your abs. (Optional: Allow your arms to mimic your abs moving upward into a V shape.)

WHAT TO IMAGINE:

- Hiking on a tight pair of jeans and then fastening the zipper inside your body; your pubic bone lifts into your hip bones, and your rib cage closes and then compresses backward toward your shoulder blades.



STEP 2

Explore layer four, the deepest transverse abdominals.

WHAT TO DO: Inhale, then exhale, picturing and feeling your abdominals wringing out and braiding together horizontally to encase your trunk. Don't relax your abs. (Optional: Allow your arms to mimic hugging toward the midline of your body.)

WHAT TO IMAGINE:

- A rope inside your body intertwining your abdominal fibers together and into your spine, as you bring your rib and hip bones closer together and then back to your sacrum and spine.



STEP 4

Now, on to layer two, the external obliques.

WHAT TO DO: Inhale, then exhale, picturing and feeling your abdominal contraction diagonally wrapping around your ribs and downward into your hips in a V shape. Don't relax your abs. (Optional: Allow your arms to mimic your abs by bending your elbows into your waist in a V shape.)

WHAT TO IMAGINE:

- A lifejacket cinching inside your body (not worn outside your body); it wrings out snugly around your rib cage and then your hip bones.



STEP 5

Finally, hone in on the superficial outermost rectus abdominals.

WHAT TO DO: Inhale, then exhale, picturing and feeling your abdominals vertically interlocking your ribs and hips together into your waistline. Don't relax your abs. (Optional: Allow your arms to mimic a padlock closing.)

WHAT TO IMAGINE:

- An interlocking padlock inside your body.



TIPS: Repeat this series often throughout your daily life to memorize and cultivate the inward carving feeling of each abdominal contraction. Here's a shortcut to memorizing the contractions: Step 1: tornado rotates inward; Step 2: rope intertwines horizontally; Step 3: tight jeans pull on and draw zipper upward; Step 4: Lifejacket cinches downward; and Step 5: padlock interlocks vertically.

The innermost layer of the abdominals are linked to the deepest postural stabilizers: the hip flexors, pelvic floor and diaphragm. Consecutively draw your outer abs in from Step 1 to nourish your fascia and enhance the malleability of your supportive breathing muscles. As you integrate the Formula into your Pilates practice, focus on maintaining efficient core contractions, a neutral pelvis, etc.

VARIATION: Reverse the Foundation Formula.

A CORE AWAKENING

Barnett's clients reflect on the effects of her Formula.

WORLD TENSION

"I found myself in the airport in a turbulent country under extensive construction. I had to move through multiple obstacles, broken cement, heaving heavy luggage. Due to armed guards and throngs of people, this situation would require far more than reliance on my routine Pilates' benefits. I calmed my insides, repeating the Formula process of anchoring my abs to my "backbone." Oxygen energized me. My anxiety settled. My decisions were strong and appropriate. I didn't relax my core when I settled in the plane. We weren't leaving each other!"—Graceanne C., 64

CORE BREATHING AND LUNG DISEASE

"Larkin's internal core/breathing techniques have been transformational for many of my patients with lung disease. She has helped patients recover from surgery, radiation and chemotherapy—some with underlying lung diseases like COPD. Implementing the Barnett Formula alone or using the Pilates equipment has helped to manage anxiety and discomfort, and I believe this supports the immune system. Daily practice of her core breathing techniques helps with panic attacks, shallow breathing, dizziness and low energy. Anecdotally, I have witnessed some of the remarkable clinical results, such as a patient with tracheal stenosis (a narrow area in their windpipe), which was only 6 millimeters wide on a CT scan of the chest. After several months of using only Larkin's Foundation Formula, the narrow area expanded to 12 millimeters on a repeat CT, with dramatic improvement in symptoms.

I have also personally experienced the effect of her Foundation Formula on my own health. After an emergency room chest X-ray for pleurisy, I discovered that my right diaphragm was paralyzed. I spent three months with her integrating her Foundation Formula into my Pilates equipment workouts. I have to admit that I was surprised and happy when my subsequent chest X-rays revealed recovery of diaphragm function! I still integrate the sequential five steps of her Formula into EVERY repetition of my own Pilates."—Dr. Gregory Loewen, pulmonary oncologist and associate professor of medicine at Washington State University

ATHLETIC ZONE

"I'm a competitive golfer. Before I get to the first hole, I warm up with the Barnett Formula. In seconds, I use it to prepare for my drive. The golf swing is complex, and my competitors are unaware of my internal centering tool. It's made my drives consistently long and far—and my back never hurts. With all the waiting in golf, I use it to my advantage to keep my focus and stamina up."—Don H., age 54

ALONE

"It was dark, the temperatures were below freezing, and I was alone at my lake house. I was heading to the outdoor hot tub—usually the highlight of my day. All of a sudden, my old hip replacement gave out and the hip joint dislocated. My body collapsed to the ground, breaking my pelvis—the pain was searing. My body was going into shock. I added screams to my engrained core Formula to override my fear of passing out or freezing to death in the snow. It allowed me to slide on my back, inch by inch, 40 feet to phone for emergency help. I could have been left alone for hours in severe cold and isolation—in a life-threatening situation. Thanks to the Barnett Formula, I am thriving."—John H.

Now that you've learned the Formula, let's add some movement and apply it to your **Pilates** work.

BARNETT FORMULA WITH ARMS

PROP: none

PURPOSE: builds awareness of center-driven movements; helps with memorization of the abdominal layers; allows you to feel the unique physical sensation of each abdominal directional line of force; serves as an outward representation of the internal pathway of the abdominal contraction; focuses the mind/body to stabilize, "center" and move efficiently; strengthens the deep core, hips and waistline

SEE IT IN ACTION!
Watch Larkin perform her entire sequence at www.pilatesstyle.com.



FOR STEP 1

SETUP: Stand with your left leg back and right leg forward. Stretch your arms forward, with your hands clasped at shoulder height.

1. Transfer your body weight forward, lifting your left leg off the floor and reaching your arms forward.

2. Step back with your left leg, "spiraling" your arms—allowing your hands to trace a coiling pathway—and bringing your clasped hands toward your navel.

3. Clasp your hands behind your body, and then open your arms, stretching them behind you as you simultaneously "spiral" (or "tornado") your abdominals toward your spine.



FOR STEP 3

SETUP: Same as step 2.

1. Slowly bend and straighten your knees, as you point your elbows into your navel, creating a V shape, which then continues diagonally overhead (like the diagonally upward direction of the ab contraction).



FOR STEP 4

SETUP: Same as step 2.

1. Continue to bend and straighten your knees, returning your elbows to

your navel in a V shape, then crossing your arms with your palms facing your body; your arms turn inward and downward until your palms press together

(like "crisscrossing" and grounding the abs into the floor).
2. Turn your body to your left, clasp your hands at

the back of your waist, then unclasp and stretch them behind you (like pressing your abs backward).



FOR STEP 2

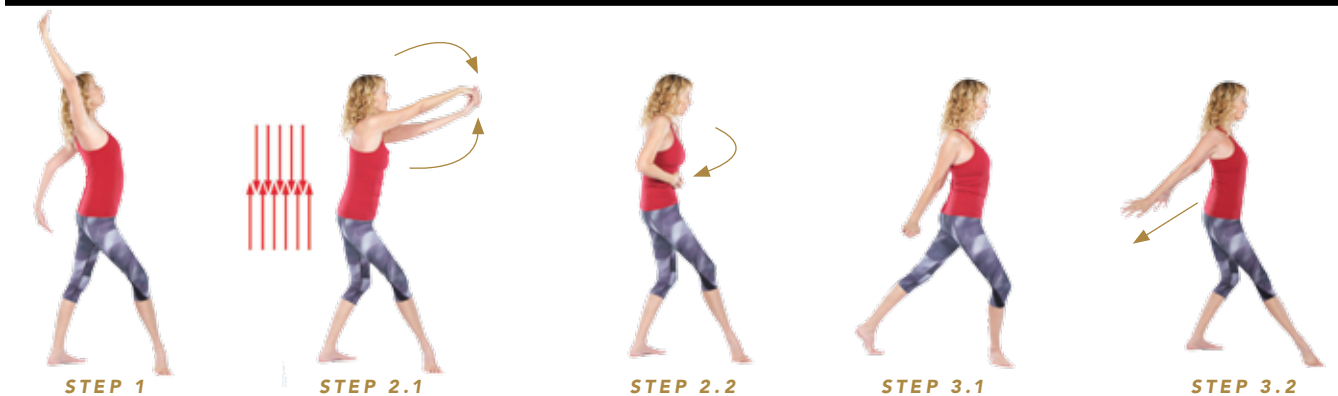
SETUP: Keeping your abdominals tight, turn your body to face front, with your right leg turned out in front of your left leg.

1. Sweep your arms from behind your body to the front of your body, interlacing your fingers together (like the ab contraction) and then

drawing your hands toward your navel.

2. Turn your body to your left, clasp your hands at the back of your waist, and

then stretch them behind you (like pressing your abs backward).



FOR STEP 5

SETUP: Turn toward your left, stretching your body up and back.

1. Scissor your arms apart, with your right arm above your head and your left arm by your side, palm facing forward.

2. Clasp your hands vertically together in front of you, and then move them to your navel (mimicking the vertical padlocking of your abs).

3. Clasp your hands behind you, then unclasp and stretch them back (like the abs moving to the spine), transferring your body weight back.

Switch the position of your legs and repeat the entire series. Do 3 sets.

TIPS: Stay focused by "seeing" the direction of the ab contraction. Feel the difference between each direction.

VARIATION: Reverse the steps.

BARNETT FORMULA WITH LEG PRESS ON CHAIR

SPRING SETTING: 2 springs on low

PROP: Magic Circle

PURPOSE: improves the mind/body connection; strengthens the abdominals, buttocks, pelvic floor, back, legs and arms; improves stability and mobility while decompressing the spine

SETUP: Stand tall with your left foot turned out, knee slightly bent, and your right foot turned out on the pedal. Gently place the Circle pad on your navel, holding onto the opposite pad with your hands.

1. Inhale, then exhale, pressing the pedal down, while gently squeezing the ring toward you; feel your abdominals "tornado" onto your spine. Slowly return the pedal up, maintaining your abdominal contraction.

2. Place the Circle pad on your right waistline, "holding" it with your right forearm, elbow bent; round your left arm at shoulder height. Inhale, then exhale, pressing the pedal down, while gently squeezing the Circle and feeling your abdominals horizontally interweave (like tightening a rope inside your trunk) as you bring your fists together in front of you. Slowly return the pedal up.

3. Slightly reposition the Circle, moving it at an upward angle along your right-side ribs, and extend your left arm behind you, palm in. Inhale, then exhale, pressing the pedal down, while gently squeezing the Circle and feeling your abdominals wrapping diagonally inward and upward toward your head (like tightening shoelaces inside your trunk), as you bend your left elbow at shoulder height and then extend your arm toward the ceiling, palm in. Slowly return the pedal up.

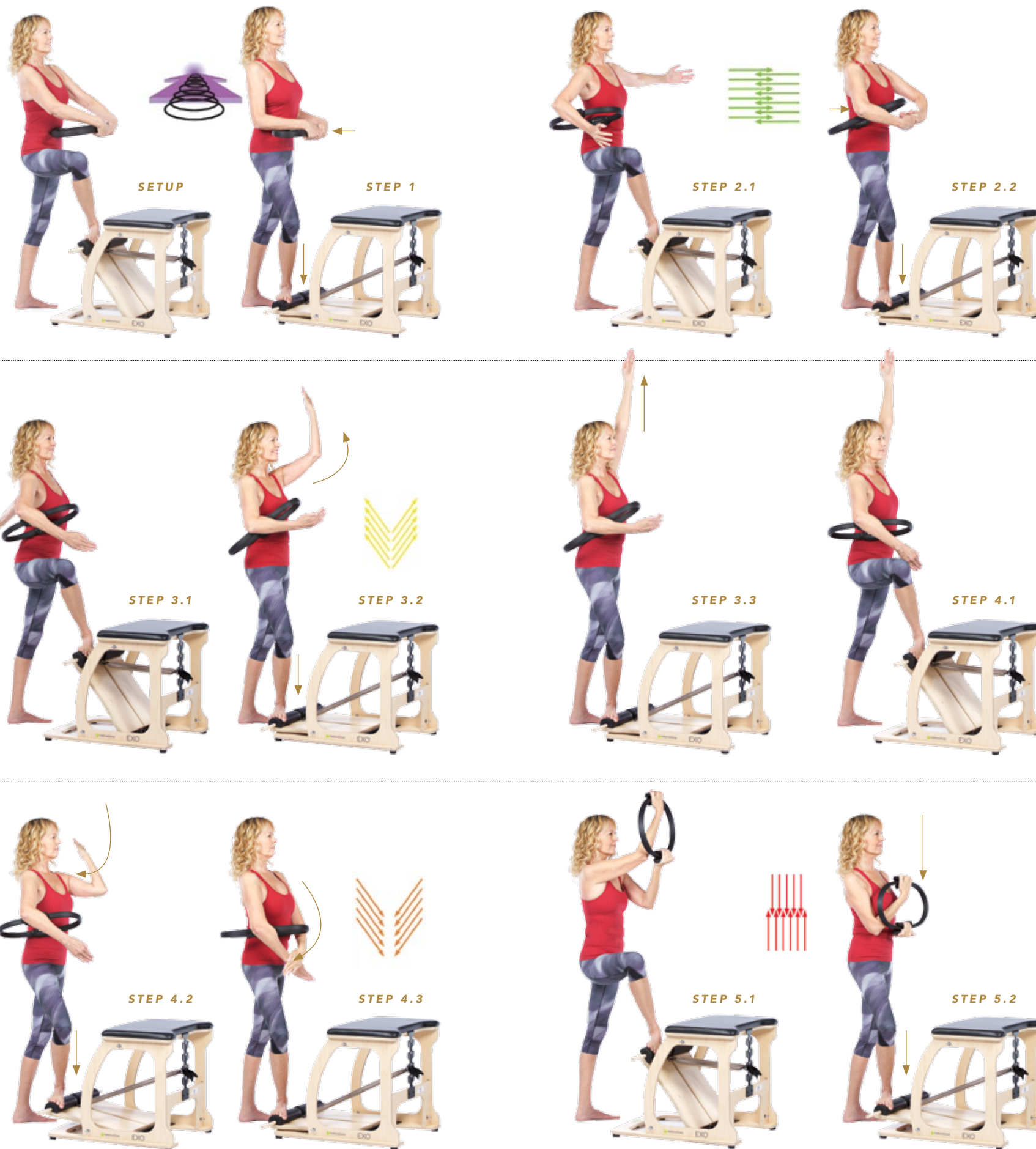
4. Angle the Circle downward along the right-side of your body. Inhale, then exhale, pressing the pedal down, while gently squeezing the Circle and imagining that you're drawing your abdominals together and downward at a diagonal angle to create a V shape (like cinching a lifejacket inside your torso), as you bend your elbow at shoulder height and then cross your hands in front of you. Slowly return the pedal up.

5. Hold the Circle in front of your face in an underhand grip, with your right hand on the top pad and your left hand on the bottom pad. Inhale, then exhale, pressing the pedal down, while squeezing the Circle and imagining clamping your abdominals vertically together, while interlocking your ribs and hips together at the waistline (like a padlock). Slowly return the pedal up.

6. Repeat the entire sequence on your opposite side. Do 3 sets.

TIPS: You're working step by step from the deepest layer of your abdominals to the outermost layer. The Circle placement and pressure helps you feel which direction the abdominal muscle fibers are contracting.

VARIATION: Reverse the order of the steps.



SEE IT IN ACTION!

Watch Larkin perform this entire sequence at www.pilatesstyle.com.



LARKIN BARNETT, BA, MA,

is a Polestar-certified Pilates instructor. Larkin invented the Barnett Formula™ 18 years before being introduced to the Pilates method. Her passion is to help the world center and breathe better. Larkin has been a movement educator for four decades, including at several universities and Canyon Ranch Spa, where she taught celebrities and Olympic athletes. The Pilates Method Alliance granted 60 PMA CECs for instructors to learn Larkin's approach to Pilates for athletes and seasoned practitioners. She is on the faculty for Balanced Body's Pilates on Tour.

Larkin is the author of six award-winning books and a Pilates DVD that incorporate her Formula, including: Practical Centering (Quest Books, 2012), which won the Nautilus Book Award, as well as five titles with Lorenz Educational Press—Practical Pilates Using Imagery (2009), with Miami City Ballet models; AthleticKinetics: Pilates and Performing Arts Aesthetic, which is both a manual and a DVD (2013); Pilates and Calisthenics for Children (2010); Creative Yoga for Children (2010); and On a Lark! Creative Movement for Children (2008). For more information, visit www.larkinbarnett.com and www.facebook.com/larkinbarnettpilates.