
PERSONAL TRAINING · COUNTY MAYO

Michelle O'Connor's *Finding* Neutral

8 weeks. Feel it before you load it.

A practical programme for women who want
real core strength, starting with neutral spine.



michelleoconnorfitness.com
[@michelleoconnorfitness](https://www.instagram.com/michelleoconnorfitness)

Most people brace wrong. And never find neutral.

"Engage your core" might be the most overused cue in fitness. Most women suck the belly in, flatten the lower back hard into the mat, hold their breath, or lock the ribs down so tightly they cannot move. That is not neutral. That is gripping.

Neutral spine changed how I train. A lot of it clicked in a physio-led Pilates class I attend every week. I am not a Pilates teacher. But I think every woman learning strength should understand neutral the way I finally did.

This playbook is how I teach it as a personal trainer: find neutral first, then build the core strength that supports everything else. Squats, hinges, carries, pull-ups. It all starts here.

WHAT NEUTRAL IS (AND IS NOT)

- **Neutral is not** sucking your stomach to your spine or holding your breath.
- **Neutral is not** pressing your lower back flat. Your natural lumbar curve stays.
- **Neutral is not** flaring the ribs or pinning them down hard. Ribs stack over the pelvis.
- **Neutral is** a balanced pelvis and rib cage, with gentle 360° support and steady breathing.
- **Neutral is** something you can find lying down, on all fours, and standing. Then keep under movement.

WHAT YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO

By the end of 8 weeks, you will feel where neutral is in your body, maintain it while your arms and legs move, and carry it into basic strength patterns. Less back ache from random bracing. More confidence when someone says "brace" in the gym. A core that supports you, not one that traps you.

Not sure what neutral feels like? DM me on Instagram @michelleoconnorfitness. Send a side-view photo lying on your back. I will help.

WHAT YOU NEED

Equipment

Minimal kit. Most of this is mat work.

1. **A mat** (or carpeted floor). Optional small pillow under your head if your chin lifts when lying down.
2. **A light resistance band** for anti-rotation work from Phase 3 onward.
3. **Optional:** a dowel, broomstick, or PVC pipe for hinge practice. Light dumbbells or water bottles for carries in Phase 4.

THE SELF-CHECK (USE EVERY SESSION)

Lying on your back: can you feel a small space under your lower back? Ribs not flared? Can you breathe into your sides and belly without losing that balance? That is your starting check. Revisit it between exercises.

BEFORE YOU START

How to use this playbook

1. **Train 2 days per week.** Sessions at least 48 hours apart.
2. **Go in order.** Phase 1 is non-negotiable. You cannot load a pattern you cannot feel.
3. **Quality over reps.** If you lose neutral, stop the set. Reset. Continue.
4. **Breathe.** If you are holding your breath, you are gripping too hard.
5. **Track sessions** using the log at the back. Note when neutral felt clear vs. lost.
6. **Be patient.** Feeling neutral takes longer than reading about it. Two weeks in, it starts to click.

THIS IS FOR YOU IF / NOT IDEAL IF

For you if: you want a stronger core, better posture under load, or a foundation before heavier strength work.

Not ideal if: you have acute back pain, are post-surgery without clearance, or are in late pregnancy without guidance. When in doubt, check with your GP or physio first.

Disclaimer: General fitness guidance, not medical advice. Stop if you feel sharp pain (not normal muscle fatigue). This is not a Pilates class plan or physiotherapy treatment.

Back pain when you try pelvic tilts? Do not push through. Reach out before you start at michelleoconnorfitness@gmail.com or book a free intro call at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

Neutral, illustrated

Keep this page open as you work through Phase 1. Neutral is the *middle* of a range, not a locked position you clench into.

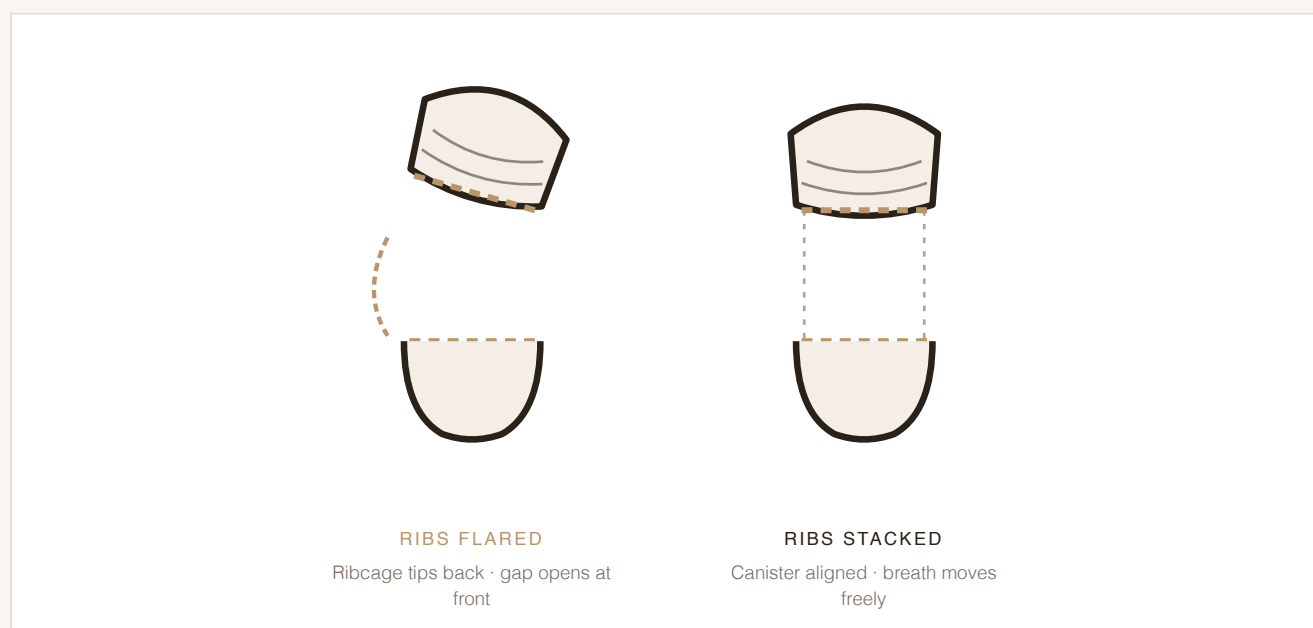
1 · Pelvic tilt — find the middle

Tip your pelvis like a bowl of water. Too far forward and your lower back over-arches; too far back and it flattens. Neutral is where the rim sits level and your natural curve stays.



2 · Rib stack — ribs over pelvis

Let your ribcage settle over your pelvis so the diaphragm (top) and pelvic floor (bottom) face each other. Flared ribs break the stack and open a gap at the front.



Awareness

Before you can hold neutral under load, you have to find it. Weeks 1–2 are all about sensation: pelvic tilt, rib placement, and breath. Movements are small and slow. That is intentional. Most people rush this and spend years bracing wrong. Slow down. Map where neutral lives in your body lying down and on all fours.

ASK FOR HELP

Can't tell tilt from tuck? Film yourself from the side doing the pelvic clock. DM @michelleoconnorfitness. I will tell you what I see.

WEEK 1 · SESSION A · SUPINE FOUNDATIONS

Focus: pelvic tilt and breath. Find the middle.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Pelvic clock (tilt)	2	8 slow each way	45s	Small range. Find the middle.
90/90 breathing	3	5 breaths	45s	Ribs wide. Belly soft. No gripping.
Dead bug (arms only)	3	6 each side	60s	Lower back quiet. Ribs down lightly.
Supine march prep	2	8 each leg	45s	Tiny lift. Neutral stays.

WEEK 1 · SESSION B · QUADRUPED FIND

Focus: neutral on all fours. Spine long, not arched.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Cat-cow (reduced range)	2	6 cycles	45s	Stop before extremes. Find centre.
Quadruped neutral hold	3	20–30 sec	45s	Long spine. Breathe.
Bird dog (hold)	3	6 each side	60s	Hips level. No rotation.
Child's pose breathing	1	8 breaths	none	Reset. Release grip.

WEEK 2 · SESSION A · SUPINE + BREATH

Add limb movement. Neutral must stay.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Pelvic clock	2	6 each way	45s	Faster to find middle now
Dead bug (opposite arm/leg)	3	5 each side	60s	Exhale as limb extends
Heel slides	3	8 each leg	45s	Back of pelvis heavy. Ribs quiet.
90/90 breathing	2	6 breaths	45s	360° expansion

WEEK 2 · SESSION B · QUADRUPED CONTROL

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Quadruped neutral hold	3	30–40 sec	45s	Build time in neutral
Bird dog (slow reps)	3	8 each side	60s	3 sec hold at extension
Toe taps (quadruped)	3	10 each foot	45s	Minimal shift through spine
Side-lying rib breath	2	5 breaths each side	45s	Breath into top ribs

Ready for Phase 2 when you can hold quadruped neutral for 40 seconds and complete dead bugs without your lower back peeling off the mat.

Control

You know where neutral is. Now we challenge it. Arms and legs move while your trunk stays organised. This is where most people revert to old habits: arching, tucking, or holding breath. Stay curious. When you lose neutral, reset. That is the work.

DM ME

Lower back lifts off the mat every dead bug? That is common. Send me a clip. Small tweaks to rib and pelvis position usually fix it.

WEEK 3 · SESSION A · DEAD BUG PROGRESSIONS

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Dead bug (full)	4	6 each side	60s	Slow. Exhale on extension.
Heel slides (slow)	3	10 each	45s	Pause at full extension
Supine band pull-apart	3	12 reps	45s	Ribs stay stacked

WEEK 3 · SESSION B · BIRD DOG + SIDE WORK

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Bird dog	4	8 each side	60s	Long line hip to heel
Side plank (knees)	3	15–20 sec each	45s	Ribs stacked over pelvis
Clamshell	3	12 each side	45s	Pelvis still. Heels connected.

WEEK 4 · SESSION A · ANTI-EXTENSION

Focus: resist arching as limbs move.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Dead bug (slow 4-count)	3	5 each side	60s	Ribs down. No back lift.
Bear hold	4	15–20 sec	45s	Knees hover. Spine neutral.
Plank (knees or full)	3	15–30 sec	60s	Quit before form breaks

WEEK 4 · SESSION B · ANTI-ROTATION PREP

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Pallof press (band, kneeling)	3	10 each side	60s	Do not rotate. Press straight out.
Bird dog	3	8 each side	60s	Maintain quality
Standing rib cage breath	2	6 breaths	45s	Find neutral standing

Want feedback on your plank or bear hold? Book a free intro call at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

Load

Neutral under light load. Squats, hinges, carries. This is where core training becomes strength training. The weight is not the point. Keeping your spine organised while you move is. Start light. Earn heavier.

BOOK A SESSION

Ready to load but not sure on form? A single 1:1 session can save months of guessing. www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

WEEK 5 · SESSION A · SQUAT + HINGE

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Box squat (bodyweight)	4	8 reps	90s	Ribs over pelvis at bottom
Dowel hinge	3	10 reps	60s	Three points of contact: head, mid-back, sacrum
Dead bug	2	6 each side	45s	Reset between strength sets

WEEK 5 · SESSION B · CARRY + PLANK

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Suitcase carry (light)	4	20 sec each side	60s	Do not lean. Stay tall.
Pallof press	3	10 each side	60s	Heavier band if clean
Plank	3	20–40 sec	60s	Neutral spine. Steady breath.

WEEK 6 · SESSION A · SQUAT PROGRESS

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Goblet squat (light DB) or BW squat	4	8 reps	90s	Brace. Breathe at top.
Romanian hinge (light)	3	8 reps	90s	Neutral spine. Hips back.
Bear hold	3	20 sec	45s	Quality finish

WEEK 6 · SESSION B · FARMER CARRY

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Farmer carry (both hands)	4	30 sec walk	60s	Tall posture. Ribs stacked.
Bird dog	2	8 each side	45s	Maintain control
Standing neutral self-check	1	5 min	none	Scan: pelvis, ribs, breath

Life

Neutral is not a mat-only skill. Weeks 7–8 connect what you have learned to daily movement: getting off the floor, picking things up, standing for long periods, and starting real strength work. The goal: you know when you are in neutral and when you are gripping. That awareness stays with you.

REACH OUT

Training for pull-ups or a 12-week programme? Neutral spine is the foundation. DM me @michelleoconnorfitness or ask about my Pull-Up Playbook.

WEEK 7 · SESSION A · DAILY PATTERNS

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Sit-to-stand (controlled)	3	10 reps	60s	Neutral on the way up
Floor get-up (no hands if able)	3	4 each side	90s	Organise before you move
Dead bug	2	6 each side	45s	Check-in between sets

WEEK 7 · SESSION B · STRENGTH CIRCUIT

Light circuit. Neutral is the priority, not speed.

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Goblet squat	3	8 reps	90s	Same weight as week 6
Suitcase carry	3	25 sec each	60s	Heavier if form holds
Pallof press	3	10 each side	60s	Standing if ready

WEEK 8 · SESSION A · INTEGRATION

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS / TIME	REST	KEY CUE
Squat + hinge combo (light)	3	6 + 6 reps	90s	Reset neutral between patterns
Farmer carry	4	40 sec	60s	Longest clean hold yet
Plank	3	30–45 sec	60s	Final push. No gripping.

WEEK 8 · SESSION B · SELF-ASSESSMENT

No new exercises. Test what you have built.

CHECK	TEST	PASS?	NOTES
Supine neutral	Find in 10 sec	Y / N	Log in tracker
Quadruped neutral	Hold 45 sec	Y / N	Breathing steady?
Dead bug	8 each, no back lift	Y / N	Quality reps only
Standing brace	Breathe + hold 10 sec	Y / N	Ribs stacked?

Passed most checks? You are ready to load heavier in the gym, or start my Pull-Up Playbook. Questions? DM @michelleoconnorfitness

Neutral is not a pose. *It is a skill.*

You spent 8 weeks learning something most programmes skip entirely. That matters. Here is how to keep it:

Self-check before every session. Ten seconds. Pelvis. Ribs. Breath. Then move.

Reset when you lose it. One bad rep with a tucked spine teaches the wrong pattern. Stop. Reorganise. Continue.

Load slowly. Neutral under a goblet squat is harder than neutral on the mat. Earn each step.

Keep one drill in every workout. Dead bug, bird dog, or Pallof press. Forever. It is maintenance, not regression.

A note from Michelle

I wrote this because I spent years bracing wrong and wondering why my core never felt strong. Finding neutral in that physio-led Pilates class changed everything about how I coach. I am not a Pilates teacher. I am a PT who thinks this should be step one for every woman learning strength.

If you want someone walking you through it week by week, or you are ready for pull-ups, squats, or a full programme, reach out. I would love to help.

Website · www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

Instagram · @michelleoconnorfitness

Email · michelleoconnorfitness@gmail.com

Also available · Michelle O'Connor's Pull-Up Playbook

Key positions at a glance

Side-on views of the moves you'll return to most. Gold marks the cue: where to breathe, or the long line to hold.



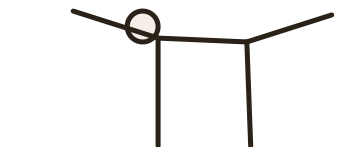
90 / 90 BREATHING

Knees up · breathe wide, ribs soft



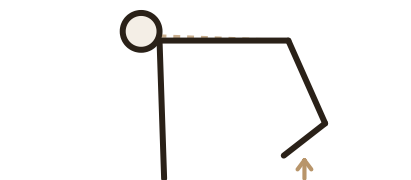
DEAD BUG

Opposite arm + leg · back stays quiet



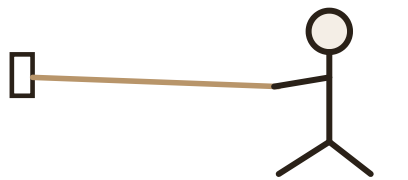
BIRD DOG

Long line hand to heel · hips level



BEAR HOLD

Knees hover · flat back, steady breath



PALLOF PRESS

Press straight out · resist the rotation

Exercise glossary

Pelvic clock

Lying on your back, gently tilt pelvis anterior (arch lower back) and posterior (flatten). Find the middle: neutral.

90/90 breathing

Feet on floor, knees bent. Breathe wide into ribs and belly. Exhale without collapsing or gripping.

Dead bug

Supine. Opposite arm and leg extend while lower back stays quiet and ribs stay stacked.

Heel slide

Lying down, slide one heel away along the floor. Pelvis and ribs stay still.

Bird dog

On all fours, extend opposite arm and leg. Hips level. No rotation through trunk.

Bear hold

Quadruped, knees hover 2–3 cm. Neutral spine. Steady breath.

Pallof press

Band anchored to the side. Press straight out from chest. Resist rotation.

Dowel hinge

Stick along spine: head, mid-back, sacrum touch. Hinge at hips without losing contact.

Neutral spine

Balanced pelvis and rib cage. Natural lumbar curve. Gentle brace. You can breathe.

Still unsure on a movement? DM @michelleoconnorfitness with a question. No such thing as a silly one.

TRACKING

Session log

Date, session (A or B), neutral clarity (1–10), and notes.

WEEK	DATE	SESSION	NEUTRAL (1–10)	NOTES
1				
1				
2				
2				
3				
3				
4				
4				
5				
5				
6				
6				
7				
7				
8				
8			Final check:	

Want coaching through all 8 weeks? Book a free intro call at www.michelleoconnorfitness.com

Ready for pull-ups next? Ask me about my Pull-Up Playbook on Instagram @michelleoconnorfitness