



Emirati entrepreneur Asma Hilal Lootah at The Hundred Pilates Studio in Dubai last month. Ms Lootah, who founded the studio in 2008, was one of the winners of this year's Emirates Woman of the Year awards. Sarah Dea / The National

The lighting of a match: how Pilates changed Asma's life

Love of fitness was a way of escaping stress and switching career

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There was a time when other Emiratis would laugh at Asma Hilal Lootah for her fit and healthy lifestyle. But she is the one laughing now.

Ms Lootah has turned her love of fitness into personal success, as the founder and owner of an award-winning Pilates studio.

She was also chosen as a 2012 Emirates Woman of the Year, having won the Achievers category of the *Emirates Woman* magazine contest. "Pilates energises me mentally and physically," said Ms Lootah, who is in the middle of an 18-month, 950-hour Pilates teacher-training course. "It makes me feel happy and great."

Ms Lootah was working as a marketing executive for Etisalat when she was introduced to the exercise discipline by her sister.

"It was like the lighting of a match," she says of her first experience in a Pilates class. "I was hooked from the start and it gave me relief from my stressful job."

Attending classes three times a

day, she became immersed in the practice and used it as motivation to change her career.

"I was stuck in a rat race and wanted to do something I enjoyed, something that made a difference," she said.

"My brother suggested that since I loved Pilates so much I should open up a studio."

Ms Lootah resigned from Etisalat and devoted herself to starting her own business. There was no turning back.

At first she had difficulty in finding a location for her studio as her search coincided with the boom years of 2006 and 2007.

"The places were not interested in opening a small business, especially for a local woman," Ms Lootah recalled.

She settled for a premises in Dubai's Healthcare City and The Hundred Pilates Studio opened in 2008.

Two years later, it won a Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Award for Young Business Leaders.

The studio's success centred around expatriate women, with few Emirati clients.

"It was tough to get locals involved as they didn't know what my business was," Ms Lootah said.

"When they heard Pilates they thought of pilots and when studio was mentioned they thought of

photography."

But slowly the word started to spread and Emiratis increasingly came to the studio.

"Every year more local men and women come and we make sure they feel safe, with segregated classes," she said.

Ms Lootah said Emiratis still only made up 10 per cent of her clientele, a figure she would like to change.

"I wish it was more but physical activity is not a big part of the culture," she said.

"People are lazy and want to go to the mall. They don't see family and peers exercising, so they are not encouraged to get active."

Ms Lootah thinks that personal trainers visiting homes could be one answer to tackling the problem, and that education at a young age is key in changing perceptions of fitness.

"We need more initiatives where schools educate why it is important to stay fit and healthy, also educating parents to educate their children," she said.

"There are so many diseases and conditions caused by inactivity among our people. It is time for the whole community to get serious about staying active."

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