

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hatelty

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Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hately. You will hear Susi's best ideas on how to reduce or even eradicate your pain and learn how to listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear it scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Susi: Welcome and thank you for listening. With this episode of *From Pain to Possibility* I want to dig into this notion of integrating yoga and medicine. And this episode really is a coming home full circle for me.

I was really fortunate at the very beginning of my career when I graduated with my kinesiology degree to land a position at a chronic pain center. Where I worked alongside occupational and physical physiotherapists and was working with people who were in predicaments as a result of car accidents and work-related accidents.

And so I would work with people for four hours at a time. And our aim and our job were what was called, back in the day, work hardy. The focus was to get someone back to work. Because, again, back in the day it was believed that we just need to get people back to work, have them feel successful at work, and that will then help them better manage their pain.

At the same time I had discovered yoga. And yoga had helped me with my own chronic issues that had evolved out of my being an athlete. And I was back running a 10-kilometer run after not being able to run for two years. And I ran faster than I had ever run. And so I was definitely someone who had drunk the Kool-Aid and wanted to talk about it to anyone who would listen. So that was the clients that I saw inside of this clinic.

And I started to integrate what I was understanding about yoga, to the degree that I could, with what we were doing from the medical perspective. And, not surprisingly, people were getting better faster. And what I really got out of that experience was the evidence of the day, the research of the day was pointing toward pain is not going to go away. We've got to get people off of insurance and back to work. That is the end all be all.

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

But I just knew that wasn't right. So, innately, intuitively, perceptively, I just knew that wasn't working as well as it could. And when I started to integrate the yoga stuff, it just made more sense. So, I was wet behind the ears, I was fresh, I didn't have enough experience to say exactly, or to articulate clearly what was not working. It was one of those like innate feelings that was validated by the application of yoga.

So, right then and there I saw the seed being planted for myself of how these two could work together. The art of yoga making the medicine more effective. So that when I started to teach yoga and I started to see all these amazing things happen in my classes, and people were just coming to class once a week. See, back then we only had registered classes available in the city that I live, Calgary. And so people would come once a week to a registered class for eight weeks. They wouldn't do any other yoga outside of it, and they got better.

And I'm like, "Wait a second, people don't need to practice every day. What the F is happening?" Like from a purely like "Wow, how is this all working, that they're getting better?" Because most people coming to my classes, not surprisingly, had pain and strain and other issues, and something was still working really, really well. So, it made me really curious and it had me start on the path of going back to do my masters.

And what I realized in that journey towards going back to do my masters was I remembered how I really disliked statistics when I was doing my honors thesis as an undergrad in utilizing exercise to manage osteoporosis. And so I realized then that I wanted to keep teaching, rather than pausing my teaching and going into research. So instead, what I chose to do is find a researcher who I could then provide a program to, to then study.

And the reason I wanted to do this was because I had seen how acupuncture and chiropractic had become mainstream. And so this was like the late '90s early 2000s and they had become mainstream by that point. And the reason that they had was because they had research to show that what they were doing was effective. And so that's what I wanted

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

to contribute into the yoga world. Because if insurance was going to cover this thing that was so awesome, they needed to have the backup to show that it was effective.

But along the way I realized that what I really wanted to do more so was teach rather than do all the stats. And I found a researcher at the University of Calgary. And I proceeded to create programs for people who were in cancer recovery. Also who were going through treatment as a result of cancer. As well as create a program on idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.

And that program was really fascinating because the doctor, she was very curious, but was also skeptical, right? And she had a lot of people coming to her, a lot of her patients coming to her saying, "What about this breathing technique or that breathing technique?" And there was no research back then to really elaborate upon that. Which, one of the reasons she wanted to do this program. But she started to really see the power of breathing, and movement, and stillness. And again, that was another step along the way for me of like, "Oh boy, this is like really freaking cool."

And then that started to lead me into becoming known as someone who was integrating, very clearly, my work as a yoga teacher with my understanding of anatomy, kinesiology, exercise, physiology with yoga. And then just being a bridge between what medicine, the various factors, whether it was surgery or rehabilitation or some other aspect within medicine, I was a bridge between that and yoga.

And so the health professionals who referred to me knew they could count on me because I had grounded, clear insight. And then the clients who were coming to me really appreciated that I could sometimes make sense of some of what wasn't making sense for them. So I could explain to them why something was maybe not working, or how it could work better.

So rarely, rarely, rarely would I suggest that what was being provided to them was not appropriate. Instead what I would do, like think about a sheet of exercises for example. Instead what I would say is, "Let's look at the how

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

of how you're actually doing the exercise." And that was really that awareness piece pulling in the yoga piece, blending it with the protocol piece. Yeah?

So it became just a fascinating journey for me in terms of integrating these various aspects of yoga, which I'll get more into as this episode carries on, and what people were already doing in medicine. So then it came a point where I was teaching more and more physical therapists, and occupational therapists, nurses, physicians, chiropractors, who were really keen on my insights. Whether it was they wanted to learn more about exercise prescription from a yoga perspective or whether they wanted to understand yoga from a biomechanical perspective because a lot of their clientele was getting hurt in yoga. And so they were coming because I had this background, a very broad all-encompassing background that made sense to them.

And what I consistently saw were these folks, these medical professionals were very curious people. And that evidence was important, but clinically they knew that in some cases that research wasn't effective. And I'll get more into that in a few moments.

What we then were able to do is to really hone their ability and their capacity to not jump to a conclusion really quickly. But rather to learn how to sit still and utilize other factors that gave them answers that were actually more meaningful and significant for their client. Right?

And this becomes really important because we can give an accurate answer, but if that accurate answer has no meaning to the client, the client is not going to really hear it. So, when we can be still, when we cannot jump to a conclusion, when we can listen fully to the client, then we can hear what drives them, what makes sense to them.

So this awareness piece on our end, as the practitioner, as the professional, which really translates into presence is so incredibly valuable, right? And it hones our ability to pull the evidence that really is meaningful

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

and clinically relevant to the person that we're working with, right? Because not all evidence is equal, right? Because there's some evidence that I've read that has absolutely no meaning to my clientele. And we have to remember that.

What I find the most fascinating, and I think about it from the work I did at the University of Calgary, is that in many cases what I've seen comes to movement. And a lot of the research around yoga is that it's validating what we already know. Someone got interested in what we were seeing as results and then were able to validate it through the research studies.

So in many cases the research is coming after the lived experience. It's not really illuminating a lot that's new, except maybe some of the mechanisms for why it's working. But the fact that it's not proving that it works, it's just validating that it works. And so when we're in this space where the research hasn't caught up to where we're at we really need to hone our ability and our eye to utilize and recognize the evidence that does exist, but then utilize our own evidence and our own scientific process to be able to work really clearly and cleanly with our client.

And that idea of presence and idea of awareness, the ability to see clearly, to not jump to conclusions, just to pause, to not get too caught up in our head, that becomes very, very, very powerful.

And I think about a story about an emergency room physician who is very deep in a meditation practice. And when he is in the emergency room, and emergency rooms move fast. But when he's in that present space, when he's connected to awareness, he feels the room slow down even though the pace is still the same. So that when the room slows down and he can just be with that patient he can tune more into skin tone, eyes, other factors that they are expressing to them. He gets better results.

And he's actually said, "I'm not quite sure how to teach it to my team." And the team he says, "Just sit me and sit by me and watch what it is that I do." And so, when I heard that I'm like, "Wait a second, I can teach that. That's

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

what I want to teach medical professionals to do. To be so good technically, they've got the technical skill, but blending this ability of being aware and of being present and really tuning into some of what we might call the soft features, which are so powerful when you combine it with all that technical skill.

I mean, it's been said that presence in the absence of technical skill really is not very helpful. You know, I'd be as blunt as to say that it's kind of useless, right? So like I can be super present and go into an operating room but that's not going to help the person on the table when I don't even know how to hold a scalpel, you know?

So, we have to remember that what I'm not suggesting, and I don't want anyone to take away from this recording is I'm not saying that presence is the end all be all. Awareness is not the end all be all. It is a significant tool when you have that classic train of medicine to make your results so much more effective. And then what we'll talk about in a subsequent episode is how to make those home exercise programs even more powerful.

So, let's dig into this just a little bit more here. And where this idea of awareness becomes powerful. And we know that evidence will say that 75, I'm just using a number, I'm throwing a number out of thin air, which is 75% of people with XYZ symptoms will benefit from ABC protocol. So then how do you know, as the medical professional, if your person is in the 75% or in the 25%? Do you just throw it at the person and kind of hope and pray it will work?

I see this all the time in the yoga industry, which is getting more and more focused in on evidence and research and people are getting caught into protocol thinking. And thinking, "Okay, well 75% benefit so." Then their brain goes to, "Oh, then everybody benefits." But that's not the case. How do you know? And I see this over and over and over again. Like how do you know? And maybe parts of the protocol will work with your person but parts won't.

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

Like of that mass of people that were tested how many of them had depression, or anxiety, or had a parent recently die, or have digestive disturbances? Like there are so many other factors that are involved and yes, research helps to highlight a story, and we have to remember that. So then when you have this level of awareness, this level of perception, you could actually see how that protocol may or may not fit, what parts of it could work, what parts of it might not work. How you might utilize that protocol and explain to the person this is why you're using it based off of what you're seeing and given what you also know about the person. This is where it could go off the rails.

If you had that kind of conversation with someone that would be really, really interesting, right? Because you're highlighting what you have been able to perceive about them and about their uniqueness and how this medicine could be supportive for them. Right? So what you're doing is you're utilizing this presence and awareness and ability to hone your craft. And ultimately you are becoming the medicine that you wish to practice. Think about that.

I remember about a decade or so ago, maybe longer, reading some stat that the rate at which a patient takes their prescription medicine is proportional to their level of trust in their physician. So, not the benefit of the medication, not what it will do, not the stats, but the trust in their medical professional, in their physician. That's really powerful, that's great example of you become the medicine which you're practicing. Because of this tool of awareness, because of the tool of clarity, of being able to choose something. When I say something, I mean a technique, a tool, a prescription, whatever it is within your toolkit with greater accuracy in a way that meaningful and significant for the client.

And at the root of that even, if we can go deeper, is the relationship, right? It's the caring and dare I say it's the love that is between, that's being cultivated, right? That is what's really, really, really powerful.

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

Which then leads into the next piece of this, which is what that does for the client. And some people might come back at me and say, “But Susi, there’s so many people who aren’t ready to be on an equal level. Like to say here is the protocol and this is why I’m choosing it for you, and this is where I think we’ll benefit, and this is where... Someone might not be able to hear that.” You’re right, so then you don’t do that, based off of the relationship you have with the person.

And I think about conversations I’ve had with psychologists where they will say to me, “Someone needs to have the base level of resource to be able to even have the awareness of themselves.” But isn’t it terrific if you, as a medical professional, had the understanding that that was the case, and this is where we bring in the biopsychosocial model a little bit, and note where they actually need the support. And now you might say, “Well Susi, that’s really idealistic in a true medical environment.” And I say, “No, I disagree.”

Which is why I’m recording this. And which is why I’ve got the integrated yoga and medicine training course that I’m running March. Is that I’ve actually highlighted key medical professionals who are doing just this. To show that it is possible with some really, really simple and easy to apply techniques.

I’m getting super passionate about this. Because I get this feedback from people, but the truth is it is possible if that curiosity is there. And I would say that there is definitely a section, a subsection, of medical professionals who are super curious, that are yoga practitioners themselves, who maybe are mindfulness or meditators, maybe not like fully yoga people.

But they take components of the practice, or maybe they’re into Chi-Gong or some other mindfulness-based practice, and they get it. Like they get that when they slow down, they can perceive more cleanly and clearly that their patient benefits more because in that process they see where their client is at and are better able to meet them where they're at without taking

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

on any sort of martyrdom role. They simply can meet them where they're at and provide them with what they need where that person is at.

This leads me into a summary here of, in yoga we have something called the Kosha model. And I'm going to outline three of the layers. One is the pranamaya kosha, which is the life force. And then there's the annamaya kosha, which is the physical body. And then the manomaya kosha, which is the mental body.

And so what's clear here is that that life force really interweaves and connects and pervades all of the others. And so that's why when we can slow down enough to be able to perceive that, because I will argue that any conscious human being perceives that. Whether you want to call it vibe, or whether you want to call it aura, or whether you just call it feel. Good energy, bad energy, however you want to label that is up to you. We all feel that.

And if we want to be able to recognize and know that we, and you, and me all are just multiple layers of energy and connection, then when we can slow down enough to perceive that and then begin to address and connect with that person on whichever layer makes the most sense, then our medicine becomes so much more effective. And that's where yoga really plays a part, is it enables you to bring in this awareness piece, bring in this presence piece, provide an understanding to who this person is, what this person is, what makes them tick in a way that is just really simple and effective.

So with that, I really encourage you, can you tell? Because like I'm super pumped on this topic, and more than anything in the world I would love to be teaching emergency teams, like emergency physician teams and other medical folks how to be able to take these yoga concepts into their practices and be able to integrate them in real time. And then recognize that all those yoga who are around you can be such a support to all of that technical training that you have. And being able to blend the yoga world with the medical world for that much better care of patients and clients.

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hately

Ep #32: Integrating Yoga and Medicine

So, in March I've got the integrating yoga and medicine training where I will be sharing interviews that I've had with medical professionals who talk about how they are doing this in a very simple way that you can apply right away. So, really solid gems.

And I'll be digging more into this concept about how you can utilize these concepts of yoga in a way that is supportive. And as well I'll be talking to the yoga teachers inside of this course of how you can better connect with medical professionals so that we're really blending our resources together for a better good. Not just a common good but for a better good, for a better outcome overall.

This is why integrating yoga and medicine is just so incredibly powerful. And the link that you can follow to register is functionalsynergy.com/integratingyogaandmedicine2021. I'm looking forward to seeing you there.

If you've been resonating with what I've been saying on the From Pain to Possibility podcast and you want to dig in more to this, whether you are a student or a professional wanting to integrate these concepts into your practices you will be interested in the therapeutic yoga intensive that I'm running this March and April. And you can learn more are www.therapeuticyogaintensive.com.