

Ep #57: Yellow Lights



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With Your Host

Susi Hatelty

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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.

Hello and welcome. For this episode I want to dig into a concept that I've used for a long, long, long time when teaching my clients. Which is the concept of yellow lights. The reason I came up with this concept is because many, many years ago I started to see a number of people who were coming to see me with what I called red light pain.

Pain and other symptoms that were constricting their life, which is why they had sought me out. But they had seen many other practitioners and they had some short term gain and relief. But they weren't getting the long term gain that they were hoping for.

Back then, because most of my clients were based in Calgary, I knew most of the practitioners that they had seen. And I knew how good those practitioners were. So I couldn't really figure out why they weren't getting better because I knew how good the professionals were.

But something struck me as I spoke to each of these people, what struck me is that they were taking the information from the practitioner and interpreting it literally. They were expecting a fix out of the experience that they were having with that practitioner.

What they weren't doing is feeling. They weren't connecting the information that they were gathering from that practitioner and actually feeling it. And I'd like to say absorbing it or integrating it into their overall system and into their body. So they weren't getting those full gains that were possible.

So at that time I decided that my job was not to advise people. My job was to help them feel. My job was to really sink into the idea of yoga as a tool of awareness. Because what these clients were not doing, they were not sinking into a deeper understanding or a deeper awareness of their system.

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They were looking to take whatever it was from the other practitioners and maintain their status quo. The trouble is, is that to recover and to heal we're asking for a shift in status quo really. So then my job, as I mentioned, was to help my clients feel.

Now it's tricky, this word feeling. There's a lot around it. And for some people feeling is just not an acceptable thing to do, for all sorts of reasons. So I had to become a bit creative and make the concept a bit more tangible.

What were we actually feeling for? And how do we know if we're actually feeling what it is we want to be feeling? So I wanted to find some way to bring about some type of quantitative measure for the qualitative experience of feeling.

And this is tricky, right? Because what we're feeling only the person can feel. I can't feel for a client. I can't feel for anybody else other than myself. And then how I then go about and describe what I'm feeling, while the other person's going to interpret it in their own way.

So it becomes really tricky for anybody who is teaching this world of feeling. Which is why I came up with the yellow light analogy. I want you to think about a traffic light where you've got red, yellow, and green. My clients are coming to see me because of red light. My clients still today come to see me for red light.

But now, today it expands beyond just physical pain. I now see people who have anxiety and depression. Have skin disorders, autoimmune issues, or they're not recovering well post-surgery. And yes, I have people who still see me because they've got persistent pain. And they know in their bones and their blood, in their breath, in their spirit of who they are, they know they can have something different. They just can't put all the pieces together; they can't figure it out. They can't get to the whispers before the scream.

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Which goes along with a quotation which I believe is attributed to a Cherokee, which is listen to your body when it whispers so you don't have to hear the scream.

So many people come to see me in their in the screams what I call the red light. And my job is to help them feel so that they can tune into the yellow. Think traffic signal, the aim here is to utilize the yellow light to slow us down. So we don't kind of go over the edge, past the red. We don't want to burn through the yellow, we don't want to burn through the red.

And so the trick here is to learn how to feel. So how do I go about doing that? Well, one way that I do this is I recognize the way that someone moves. Their movement patterns, their compensation patterns. Oftentimes initially the compensations give us highlights into what is contributing to why the red is being experienced.

Every person that I see compensates. And it just so happens that I've seen a correlation between reducing compensation patterns and reducing pain symptoms. And when I'm working with someone who has anxiety or has depression and that is something they are looking to resolve, they also then start to see the compensation patterns that lead to anxiety episodes, depressive episodes.

The same thing is true for migraines and for psoriasis. Amongst the people that I see is they can start to tune in to some of these compensatory patterns. Which then lead to the experience of anxiety, of depression, of psoriasis, et cetera, et cetera. Autoimmune flares, that sort of thing.

Those compensatory patterns they start to recognize are the yellow lights. And so you might be scratching your head and saying, "Well, they're not a really big deal." Yeah, that's the point.

Yellow lights are so easy to blow through because yeah, they are no big deal. I mean, think about a traffic light. I certainly know in Calgary we've got people who like to burn through the yellows. They see the yellow and they

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put the gas on to get through it, right? And in some intersections, it is known that some yellows turn to red really fast, or there's some that are a little bit more prolonged.

And so it's the same thing within our body. As we tune into some of the compensatory patterns, we tune into some of the other yellow lights that we perceive in our own self. We start to recognize the ebb and the flow of how our system works. We understand the bandwidth that we have and how that battery starts to die. How the fuel tank starts to empty.

I know in my own car that the top half it seems like in my gas tank is bigger than the bottom half. I know that sounds crazy. But when you look at the dial on my car it typically drops to the halfway mark a lot slower than the second half.

So whether it's a gauge issue or not, I don't know enough about cars. I just simply have a recognition that it takes longer to empty the top half on the gauge. And the second half goes way faster. So I just recognize that about my car. And when I need gas ultimately.

It's the same thing I find with our bodies, is that when we can tune into and I can help someone tune into that ebb and that flow, and I can help them tune into are those yellow lights a very, very dim or a light yellow? Or are they a bit more stale? Are they turning to red faster? How close are they to orange if we can think about between yellow and red is an orange?

As someone starts to really get an understanding of that, they start to be able to operate inside of a world of yellow. And they have less and less experiences of red.

So let me give you a few examples here. But before I give you those examples, there's one little summary I want to provide to you. Why do this? It takes a bit of effort to do it. So other than reducing the pain symptoms, or reducing the experience of anxiety, or reducing the experience of depression, reducing the experiences of flares. Why do this?

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Well, another way of saying this is you're doing this to grow your awareness. And growing your awareness of how to listen to your body. I mean, I read it all over the place, "Just listen to your body. Just listen to your body." But so many people don't know what they're listening for.

And because these are subjective experiences that we're actually listening for, my own experience, I might describe a yellow light for myself in a similar way that you might describe a yellow light for you. But even though we're describing them in the same way, we might feel them entirely differently.

So when we can tune into our own world we have more awareness, and we have more choice. And we have more options, we have more variability, and then how we go about doing things. We have the opportunity to get more agile, more bandwidth. We tune into our own unique tempo, our own unique rhythm.

And if I can say something somewhat bold, I don't know anything that is more powerful than really tuning into that which is uniquely us. Our rhythm, our tempo, our pulse. Because when we have those ingredients, I mean, again, not to be bold, but maybe I will be, we become unstoppable.

Because we can really tune into when we can push, when we need to rest. When there is maybe the bandwidth that we can just go a little bit more, because we're just tuned into knowing then what we need to do to take care of ourselves.

All right, let me give you some examples of yellow lights. The first few examples will be from my own life because it's so easy to describe qualities of my own.

When I was younger, in my early 20s, I had a whole bunch of pain all over. And they came from a variety of different injuries I had in my late teens and in my early 20s from the athletic endeavors that I was a part of. So I was

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pretty classic as an elite athlete that I could put the blinders on, put my head down, and just give her.

So it didn't really matter what the yellow lights were, they meant nothing to be back then. Didn't even know there was such a thing. I think I was operating in a lot of red. And I was very functional in red and I just kept going and going and going until my body just one day just said, "Stop."

And I couldn't figure out why I couldn't keep running, why I couldn't hike, and why I couldn't ride my bike. Why everything was very, very painful. Then I found yoga in combination with a terrific physical therapist.

And then I figured a few things out. And then I slowly got myself back to running a minute at a time. Then five minutes at a time. And over a four month period of time, I was able to run a 10K faster than I'd ever run it in my life.

So I was able to get back pain free. I also fell in love with yoga at that time, not surprisingly. And about 10 years later I got the urge to get back running again. And I really wanted to run a half marathon. So I started to train. I was on a treadmill because it was in the middle of winter that I was doing the training. And week by week I was carrying along just fine.

Then all of a sudden, I started to notice what I call a whisper. A whisper of something I remembered from when I was younger. It was long the IT band and a little into the hip. And I'm like, "Oh, wait a second. I recognize you." And I remembered it as a feeling I had before I had all that pain in my early 20s.

So instead of putting my head down and going for it, I had learned that lesson. So I rejiggered my yoga program, understanding that I didn't have the infrastructure or the integrity to bear the load of the way that I was training at that time. So the whispers I interpreted as being, "Hey, you've got some great lung capacity, but your myofascial system is unable to absorb this load of training for this half marathon."

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So I shifted up how I did my yoga practice. I added a few more different movements in. I was able to create better connections in my system, and I was able to absorb the load better. And I was able to get back to my running without any pain or strain.

That's a really great example of one. Another example is in 2011, the day after Christmas, I was moving some files downstairs and I tripped and I fell square on my coccyx. And when I got up, I was thinking to myself, "Well, I'm going to have to be my own best student."

It turned out that I had hit square on my coccyx and had sprained my coccyx. And I had done something with my SI joint, I don't exactly remember what. My pelvic floor was in incredible spasm. Spasm to the point where I couldn't sit down at all, a donut was out of the question. And for me to walk from room to room in my house I had to hold on to the walls.

Over a period of time with some treatment with a chiropractic and physical therapist I was slowly able to reduce some of the spasming and get myself moving again. Kind of reconnect a bit of my breathing. And onward I went.

About six weeks in I could feel, like a little niggles, that I was ready for a yoga practice. And I started to play around with some yoga poses that I knew. I could do the movement, and here's what's important, I could do the movement. I could step my legs wide and move myself into warrior two. I could step my leg long and I could move myself into warrior one.

But what also happened is my pelvic floor went into massive spasm when I did that. So it struck me, okay, so I've got the range of motion to be able to do this, I have the capacity to do this movement. But it's clear, I do not have the capability. I don't have the component part because my pelvic floor feels the need to go into spasm. And that's really not something that needs to happen.

So then what I started to do is I started to move only in the range where my pelvic floor would give me no indication that I was going too far. And I

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started to learn the difference between a pelvic floor contraction and a pelvic floor spasm. Now, of course, I knew what a contraction was before but now I was just so much more focused and was like, “Okay, I've got a new relationship with my pelvic floor.”

So then I started to be able to understand my pelvic floor, how it was responding to different loads. So whether I was lifting up a box or groceries, climbing stairs, going into a yoga position, I could get a better understanding of what that pelvic floor was telling me. To the point where then I could feel when it was time to take my legs wider again or longer again.

What was interesting is it took me six months to get back to my full yoga practice. And the last position, which eluded me for about two and a half months, was stepping from uttanasana, standing forward bend, back into a lunge. That was the one last one that eluded me for a while. I used my pelvic floor as the cue, as the yellow light to let me know how I was progressing.

So again, let me reiterate, I could do the yoga movements that I knew and loved. I had the capacity for them. But my pelvic floor indicated to me that I didn't have the component. It was if I went too far a red light. It was a yellow light to let me know when I was going almost too far.

So if I listened to it, I didn't blow by it and my pelvic floor didn't spasm. If I stayed in more of a quieter, and then worked through my range of motion there and improved the integrity and my infrastructure there, I was able to progress a lot faster.

A third example was in March 2020 when we all shut down, I also shut down a lot of my working out. And then when we opened up in the summer, I believe it was the summer, and I got back to lifting weights again, I moved slowly knowing what I know.

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And then I got excited because I was getting stronger. And I felt really, really good. And I started to load up more weight, probably a little bit too fast. And then I just could feel a little something that I had remembered from when I was in my early 20s. And it was like, "Oh, interesting. I'm noticing a little thing in and around my hip. You know what? I am either lifting too much weight, or I am lifting too much weight."

So then what I started to do is I backed it up, took some weight off. Reconnected to my movement patterns, checked in on my yoga practice, checked in on some other movement stuff that I was doing, reconnected my body parts. So that then when I was able to go back to lifting my weights, I was able to connect and I was able to just tune in more closely to what was going on.

So I can have these ways now of recognizing when I'm in a space in my body where my infrastructure or my integrity is unable to absorb the load that I'm either lifting, or maybe it's when I'm running, or doing my yoga practice. So I'm just tuning in for sensations that I now can recognize are indicators that if I don't pay attention to them, if I do blow by them, they're likely going to lead to something closer to red.

Now, here's what's really interesting, is that over the years I've spent lots of time paying attention and I teach it to my clientele. So it's often a conversation that I'm having. So it's a conversation I listen to as I tell other people about it. So it's something that is just a part of my day in and day out.

One thing I like to tell people is that as you start to gain some facility with being able to listen and understanding what contributes to some of the symptoms that make you feel more trapped, is as you get more and more facility over listening, you stop actually feeling trapped by symptoms.

Here's what's cool, it's that you then recognize that the yellow lights are actually something to pay attention to. And that may be there's an even quieter yellow light to the yellow light that you're perceiving. So then your

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body starts to become so much more tuned in, the gripping patterns so much more less, your use of energy so much more efficient.

So your tendencies towards, maybe you're someone who has a tendency towards overwork and burnout, or maybe over training, or of that sort, but you start to recognize those signals well before they even happen. So your system becomes that much more fine-tuned.

You really stop playing that kind of edge, which some people think is the edge of greater game. But it's really the edge of greater fatigue. And you operate more and more in your zone of genius, or zone of efficiency, or zone of just honed movement pattern and honed energy pattern. You're really able to tune in more closely and more connectedly to yourself.

I remember when I was having my scheduled C-section for my twins. And I was on the table and I remember feeling the nausea starting to build as the anesthesiologist was working with me. And I remember saying to him, "Oh, I feel nausea starting to come."

And then they turned the table and then I threw up. And he kind of looked at me and he had a quizzical look in his eye, kind of like how a dog looks at their owner. And he says to me, "How did you even feel that? Like what do you do? Why are you so aware?"

And my hunch was is that most people don't feel the nausea coming for a number of reasons. I mean, you're trapped on a bed and you're getting yourself sectioned and all that. Like there's a lot of other things going on around the room for people not to be aware.

But it struck me from his perspective that this was different for him. And it was just because I could feel it coming up as opposed to waiting until it was enough in my space. I was tuned in enough to that quieter whisper, right?

So because you're attuned to that quieter whisper, you're just tuned into a quieter whisper. There is a quieter sense of energy inside of yourself. You

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can respond at a quieter level, rather than having your bandwidth smaller when the sound gets louder. You're having to really react at that level.

So what I'm saying is your energy can be better utilized. Your ability to down regulate improves. Your ability to come more into a parasympathetic response improves. There's less over busy. There's less strain. There's more connectedness from inside to out and outside to in, between body and mind. And you can just tune into this gentler, more nuanced pulse inside of you.

So then it becomes a conversation that's less about preventing pain, or migraines, or anxiety, or depression. And it becomes this other whole body sense of listening, whole body and mind. And then the benefit that comes from that, well, the only thing I can say is you'd have to experience it to know it.

What I can say is that each of my clients who have been able to experience it at that level, where they don't have to mitigate for pain, they're now operating in this other arena that some have called peace. Some have called joy. Some have called just this really quiet sense of ease. That's worth it all.

Yellow lights, listen to the whispers so you don't have to hear the screams. Befriend your body. Recognize your symptoms as messengers. Hear the communication between your brain, your body, your breath, and your being.

If this episode really resonates with you, you will love Healing and Revealing Human Potential where we dig into all sorts of things related to yellow lights, listening closely, understanding that the symptoms and the signals really are messengers for us to listen to and to act upon. You can learn more by emailing us at health@functionalsynergy.com.

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Oh and hey, while I've still got you here, we are enrolling our Functional Synergy Yoga Therapy Certification Program. So email us at health@functionalsynergy.com if the following really interests you.

The program is all about harnessing the intelligence of your body, the knowing in your heart, and the power of your brain so you can truly help yourself and your clients heal and recover. If that's something you want to dig into and you want me to be your primary teacher, send us a note health@functionalsynergy.com. I'd love to chat.