

Ep #98: Breathing And Your Rib Cage



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Susi Hatelty

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hatley. 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 Hatley.

Welcome, or welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today I want to dig into the rib cage and teach you two different breathing exercises that I'll do with my clients when we want to focus in on the rib cage either specifically, or if we can see that what's going on the rib cage is impacting something somewhere else. Like up into the neck, or down the arm, into the abdomen, even into digestion, or the SI joint, hips, sometimes even down through to the knees, and to the feet.

Because the rib cage like any part of the body has connections myofascially to every other part. And this bracing pattern, or gripping pattern, or breath holding pattern, or simply tension sitting in the rib cage can have a huge impact elsewhere in the body. So when we can improve its function, its suppleness we'll call it, then it can have quite a significant impact elsewhere in the body.

So before we get into the exercises, let's look first at this anatomical relationship between the rib cage and the other parts of the body. When you look at it specifically, I like to look at it like a cylinder. And then on the cylinder are these two triangles that are our shoulder blades. And the shoulder blades connect into the humerus, the arm bone, and then move down to the hand.

And there are a series of muscles that attach between that triangle and the spine, the triangle and then onto the cylinder being the rib cage. And then also from this triangle on to the arm bone. So there's this really interesting connection between how the triangle and the cylinder work together. So how the shoulder blade and the rib cage work together and in relationship with the arm and the spine.

So we have muscles like the trapezius, the levator scapula that attach from the blade onto the spine. We have muscles like the serratus anterior and

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the pec minor that attached from the blade onto the rib cage. And we have muscles like the rotator cuff, which is a group of four that attach from the blade onto the arm bone.

So there's this connection between the blade and the spine and the rib cage and the arm. So you can see just from this perspective how a limitation in the rib cage can really impact the thoracic spine, the cervical spine, as well as the function of the arm, never mind the function of the blade, right?

Then if we go down, the diaphragm sits in the bottom of the rib cage, that connects with the pelvic floor. It also has connection because of the muscles that attach to the rib cage, like the rectus abdominus and the obliques, that has a connection to the pelvis and it can also have a connection with the digestive system.

So you're starting to see more and more how this rib cage, it's like that song we learned as kids where it's like in this case it's the rib cage that's connected to the shoulder blade that's connected to the arm bone, oh yeah, and that's connected to the pelvis. Right? It really is.

And so when people do these two exercises that I'm showing you, it's really interesting what can arise. Relaxed neck, relaxed upper traps area, reduced headaches, reduced carpal tunnel syndrome, better digestion, less constipation, freedom in the SI, freedom through the knees. It's really interesting.

And when I've got clients who have lung issues, whether they are minor or major, what I often see is that their rib cage is quite limited. And they over utilize secondary breathing muscles being up towards the neck. So it's curious how these things can impact the rib cage, and how the rib cage can impact these things.

So when we can specifically work with the rib cage, it can have quite an interesting impact on the way that we express the condition or the symptoms that we have, and also can change up how we are feeling

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overall in our body: relaxed, not relaxed, ease in our mind, not ease in our mind, from a simple rib cage exercise. So it's worthwhile to try. And I'll walk through it now so you can experience these two different exercises with this prop that I call a strap.

So you can use a scarf for this, you can use a buckled strap for this. I tend to use material that looks more like a scarf, because there's a width to it, there's a softness to it, it's not as rigid as a strap. However, some people don't have that handy, and so using a buckle strap can be a lot easier. And if you're out for a walk right now or if you're sitting outside and you're nowhere near any type of scarf or buckle strap, you can just use your hands to begin with.

So the exercise, I call it strap breathing specifically at the rib cage. And what I'd like you to do is to take your strap, or the material, or the scarf, and tie it around your lowest ribs, so below the breastbone. And to tie it not snugly so that you can't breathe, but tie it to a degree that you can feel it around your rib cage.

So it's not snug, it's a little less than snug, but it's not loose, It's not falling off or almost falling off. You can feel it connecting to your ribs. And then if it's a wider piece of material or a scarf, smooth it out so there's not a lot of wrinkles in it so that it's not uncomfortable.

Okay, so let's get into the exercises now. And keep in mind that I can't see you right now so I'll be relying on you to pay attention to how your body is responding to these exercises. And if it is not feeling right, then please do not continue to do them. If you find yourself getting more tense, or short of breath, or pain symptoms are going up, or anything in that realm, please stop doing the exercises.

And for an image of what this exercise looks like, you can go to our show notes and I've put a photo of myself doing the exercise so that you can see exactly where to place the strap if you want more visual direction. All right, let's get into it.

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And we're going to begin with just a baseline exercise here and all I want you to notice is where you notice your breathing. And you might notice it in your belly, you might notice it in your chest, you might notice it really anywhere, or you may only notice it coming in through your nose. Just notice where it is that you feel it.

And what I mean by feeling it, if you're new to breathing exercises, because people who listen to this podcast episode are both health professionals, yoga teachers, as well as people who are brand new and are in pain and are wanting help. So if you're new to breathing exercises, think about where you feel your body moving when you breathe.

Okay, so now you've got that as a baseline, I want you to bring your attention to the side ribs. And without changing the volume of your breath, bring and direct the breath to the side ribs. Now, I'm being specific with the instruction about not increasing the volume of your breath, so don't breathe deeper, because if you breathe deeper anything can happen, right? Like you can move all sorts of parts of your body with increased pressure.

I want you just to take the breath that you're breathing and direct it to the side ribs. And this might feel a little bit limited or tight. You'll probably start to feel the ribs touching a bit more against the strap or against the material. Or if you're placing your hands at your ribs, you might feel it there.

And do your best to not get up into your neck or into the upper trap area. Really keep it down low to where the strap is, taking it wide into those ribs, those side ribs. Take another couple of breaths. And then bring the breath to the back ribs, so the backside of you. This can sometimes be a bit more difficult.

See if you can find the back ribs whether with your own mind's eye or kinesthetically through your felt sense and take the breath back there. Press those ribs back into the strap or the material, you can even place your hands back there if you don't have the strap or material. We don't tend to think about the back of our body very much so this is one reason why it can sometimes be a little bit difficult.

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Okay, so now what I'd like you to do is the same thing, except now you'll use the side and the back of your ribs. And so again, just notice how those ribs are moving. And it might be really, really limited. And it's okay, just work with what you've got, noticing the quality that's there.

Okay, and now let that go. And untie the scarf, or material, or strap and just let your breath be normal, meaning just an inhale and exhale, and notice if anything has shifted. So compared to the baseline where you just noticed where the breath was, what do you now notice with your breathing? And have any symptoms shifted? Or any sensations in your body, have they shifted?

Are you noticing anything different or new through your knees, your hips, your back, your belly, your rib cage, your neck, your head, your elbows, your hands? Even there might be a temperature change. And not that I'm seeking for you to have a change because not all exercises, or what I call stimulus, have an impact for everybody. What I do want you to notice is if there is one. That's what's important, yeah.

Okay, so then we're going to move to the second exercise. And before we get into it, one of the reasons I'm doing this is because a lot of people don't really think about their body as being impactful for their breathing. We typically think about breathing as being this respiratory function, which it is, obviously, right?

But what I want you to think about is before breath was breath, it was air sitting in front of your face. And then there's a pressure change, a vacuum air comes in, it turns into breath. And then it does all that breath stuff, the respiratory stuff, and then it moves out of your body. But what's often not considered is the body.

And I am always amazed at how when we can help a client improve the suppleness of their body, their breath also improves. And I saw this back in the early days of my teaching career when I was working with people who I didn't know had lung conditions, they didn't tell me. And we were focusing mostly on movement. We did a little bit of breath work at the end of class,

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which probably had an impact. But most of it was these really simple small movements that I was teaching.

And they would come back and tell me how their flow meter readings had changed, and back then I didn't know what that was. And what they were telling me is that how they were breathing was changing. The efficiency and the effectiveness of their breathing was changing. And it was a measurable result.

So it really started to dawn on me how supple our body is really shifts the way that we breathe. It's not just, oh, let's improve inhale or let's improve exhale. But let's improve the suppleness of the body so that we can take in a better breath, so we can exhale a better breath.

Okay, so then let's go into the second exercise. Same strap, we're now going to slide it up right around the armpits. And so we're tying it to the upper ribs. And we're going to do the exact same thing. So once this is set up just underneath those armpits, now feel yourself breathing and where that breath is.

And then begin to take the breath to the side ribs. Now this might be a bit trickier because up and around the armpit area can be a lot more limited for some people. And this is definitely not an area that we often think about around breathing because it's so much further away from the diaphragm than the lower ribs.

And again, try to make this one where you're not increasing the volume of your breath, you're not utilizing the muscles of your neck to do this, you're just taking your awareness to the side of your ribs. And even if it's really limited, just gently come up to the wall or the sense of tightness that's there, or however you might describe it. Try not to bust through it, just feel the start of it and just meet it like you're meeting a friend.

Okay, now let's do it in the back ribs. So bringing the awareness to the back ribs and bringing the breath to the back ribs. And again, same thing, this might be really limited. But again, just meet it like you'd be meeting a

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friend. You're not trying to beat anything down or crack anything open. You're not trying to change anything except bringing the breath to the back of the ribs. It's like you're getting to know your ribs for the first time.

Okay, and now let's do both, so the back and the side of the ribs. Okay, and then let that go. Untie the strap and now allow your normal breath to come back in, regular inhale, regular exhale. And now notice what you notice.

Now that you're aware of your ribs and how they are moving or not moving, you can now take this awareness into a consistent practice. Or when you're driving and you're at a stop sign or a stoplight, just tune into your breathing. Or if you need to take a break from being in front of the computer and you're having a glass of water or having a meal, just take a moment and notice where your breathing is.

And you'll start to notice more and more of this relationship between your rib cage, your breath, and the rest of your body. And the impact and the influence of the rib cage and breath on the rest of your body.

Now, if this resonated for you and you want to dig into this even more, then send us an email to Kiya at health@functionalsynergy.com. We have a series of private sessions where we can work with you more deeply, as well as professional training programs for health professionals and yoga teachers where you can dig into this more along with the other therapeutic techniques that I utilize to get the amazing results that I do.

So if you want to dig into that and really grow a client base that you can serve, we'd be honored to work with you. Just send us a note at health@functionalsynergy.com. You have a great, great day.