

Ep #137: Exploring Your Neck (Part 3)



Full Episode Transcript

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.

Welcome and welcome back. With this episode we dig into part three of exploring the neck. And today we'll be exploring the primary stabilizing structure, which is a name that I utilize for a series of muscles that stabilize the shoulder girdle.

Now the reason I'm speaking about this particular area is because what I have found over the almost 30 years of working with people with neck pain is that when I can help clear up and sort of sort out some of the dysfunctional or compensatory patterns around the shoulder girdle a lot of neck pain clears up as well. I like to call it the first root of neck function sits between and within the shoulder girdle.

So we're going to be exploring that. I'm going to be talking a bit about the anatomy, the function of this particular area, some of the downsides to knowing the anatomy in this area and what it can sometimes do to mess up the recovery process, and then to take you through your own exploration.

If as you are listening to what I'm saying it's really resonating with you, then you are likely going to love the November program that I'm leading called *Power of Pure Movement: Unwinding and Unraveling the Neck*, which I am leading November 14th, 15th, and 16th. The sessions run from 12:15 to 1:45 Mountain Time. They're all recorded.

And not only will you get this four and a half hours of teaching with me, you'll also get two extra hours of sequences and exploration as a part of this training. So lots of really, really, great information, explorations, and teaching so you can connect in with your neck and the function.

And also as a health professional as you begin to explore this in your own self, you'll be able to teach it that much better to your clients. It will become less of an intellectual process and one which you are really living and

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breathing. I like to say that we want to be able to eat our cooking and not throw up, right?

So what we are teaching is what we actually believe, what we practice, and we see the results from doing that practice. And so that is in part what this programming is about, is your own experience in your own body and out of that lived experience you are able to teach it so much more effectively to your clients.

Now, if you are not a health professional, or a yoga teacher, or a Pilates teacher, or a massage therapist, or any of the professions within the broader context of health profession, you're someone who would be a student of this, you are absolutely welcome. You will get a lot of great information because I'll be digging into anatomy and biomechanics. And you will learn a lot. So you are welcome to this program as well.

How you can access it is learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck. That's learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck.

Okay, so let's dig into it. As I mentioned earlier this is about the first root of neck function, and it's the area that I like to call the primary stabilizing structure. The primary stabilizing structure, as I describe it, consists of six muscles which connect the shoulder girdle to the ribcage and the spine. And when these six muscles are balanced with each other, then greater balance, stability, and flow of movement occurs.

And as it relates to the neck, so much more freedom arises. And the reason for this is that this base of support that's provided provides a nice foundation from which the neck muscles attach. Because a lot of neck muscles attach to the shoulder blade, and to the thoracic spine, to ribs. And so when we can get a primary stabilizing structure that is functioning well it just provides a nice foundation for the neck muscles themselves.

Okay, so the muscles I'm referring to are the serratus anterior, the rhomboids, the lower, middle, and upper traps, or trapezius, levator scapula, the pectoralis minor, and the latissimus dorsi. I could include more

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muscles, I recognize. So some of the strong anatomy people listening to this will be like, “Oh, why not this and why not this?” And I know, but I'm keeping it super simple here so that people can explore this and dial in closely. And then you'll likely start to see other relationships as well.

Together, the balance of these muscles acts as an axis for movement, stability, strength, and mobility. For example, the serratus anterior protracts the shoulder blade so that it draws forward and underneath the armpit. So it comes around that ribcage. It balances the rhomboids and middle traps, which retracts that same shoulder blade moving backwards toward the spine.

The lower trapezius draws the shoulder blade down the back towards the pelvis, oftentimes when someone says the cue, “pull the shoulder blades to the back pockets,” that's pulling the blades down, that's the lower trapezius work. And this balances the upper trapezius and levator scapula, which raise that scapula shoulder blade toward the ear, as well as balancing the pec minor, which draws that scapula forward.

So kind of imagine the scapula going around the shoulder down, although it's not really doing that. But that pec minor is on the front, it's on the anterior side of the ribcage attaching to the coracoid process. And that will pull that coracoid process down. So that blade kind of does an elevation but forward motion with the latissimus dorsi.

What's interesting about this is it's the larger of the muscles in this group, I like to call it a power muscle. A lot of anatomists out there call it a power muscle because it is so wide spreading, so big, and it begins the front side of the arm bone, or the humerus, crosses over the inferior tip of the shoulder blade and attaches through fascia to the spine and to the pelvis.

So it's a direct connection between the movement of the arm, the shoulder blade, the spine, and pelvis. So it can depress the shoulder girdle, as well as move the shoulder joint into extension, medial rotation, and adduction.

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So what's cool about these muscles is how they interrelate will affect both the positioning of the shoulder blade on the ribcage and the movement of the shoulder blade as it relates to the arm, right? So how that blade lives on the ribcage and how it moves relative to the arm. So if the tissue is pulled tight, or it's weak, or it's constricted, or limited, or really whatever word you want to use to describe tissue that's not supple, that's not responsive, right?

If that's the case, if the muscles attaching to the blade are not responsive, maybe they're dehydrated, or maybe they're congested, or they're weak, or they're just not responding well, that shoulder blade's ability to function optimally will be disrupted. Which can then not only lead to the possibility of injury, but can really mess up the neck. Or if you've already had a neck issue, whether it's whiplash or any other trauma to the neck, then it can kind of catalyze further persistency of symptoms, okay?

So, as I mentioned, how this all relates to each other is that one of those roots of neck functions sits squarely within this primary structure. And I've seen time and time and time again, we can do all sorts of work to the neck, you can go and get adjusted by any number of professionals who work with the body with their hands, whether it's chiro, or osteo, or osteopath, or physical therapy, or massage therapy, or any number, really, of body workers out there that work with the neck.

But if you don't change up or shift up the way the tissue operates and responds, then that neuromuscular pattern is going to remain the same. Yes, you'll get some relief, you'll get intermittent relief. But to have sustainable relief could or it will be more likely elusive for you and for your clients.

So when we can tune in to the shoulder girdle function, how the blades work relative to the arm, relative to the spine, relative to the ribcage, so much can change up in the neck. So we're wanting to help bring some nice cohesiveness between these structures, and that can have a great, great impact on the neck and on the head.

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Now, one note to keep in mind, when people hear me say this, what they will often say is, “Okay, tell me what to strengthen, tell me what to release, or tell me what to mobilize so that I can change things up.” And as I've mentioned in many different episodes and in the previous two for the exploration of the neck series, it's not just about which exercises to do or which muscle to engage.

It's never about one muscle or one area. That one muscle or one area might grab our attention, and we need to be sure to not just zoom in and get overly focused. We need to be able to see the relationship between the parts. And to do that we need to feel.

Which is why in the previous episodes I moved you or I guided you through some neck movements, some rotation, but also to feel the quality of the tissue. And if you could sense the quality of tissue changing as you went about your movement. Because so often we can make recovery and rehabilitation merely an intellectual process.

And yet, what I've seen over and over again, along with my clients and along with my trainees, is that to have sustainable gains you need more than just intellect. Your body isn't actually broken unless there's something broken.

There are some dysfunctional patterns, yes. But that doesn't mean there's anything broken. They're more often habitual patterns that have arisen for very, very, very good reason. It might not seem like it's supportive, but whatever your tissue is doing through that shoulder girdle, through that neck, it is a version of your system saying this is what you need for support.

Not the best option for support, but it's the best option that you have chosen. Not consciously, of course, but it's your system that has chosen it, right?

So while this biomechanical knowledge is really, really key, there's a really keen ability as a client for you to feel for yourself. But also as a teacher to be able to see these movement patterns so you can guide the client to this

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place of feeling. That it's not just this intellectual thing that I want my blade to do this, or I want my ribcage should do this, as if your body is this thing to manipulate or modify.

When you can feel and tune in, now you're able to sense it is being responsive and you will find that, and this might sound really wackadoodle and a bit *woo-ey*, your body will trust you more. Your body, if I could humanize it, will know that you're not just trying to drive it into some space, but that you're actually listening to its response and the way that its tissue is responding. Because ultimately there's nothing to fix, just movement patterns to change.

And to me, the word fix and change are very different in this context. We can go to a chiro, I've been to my chiro many, many, many times when things are just not right, or I can't figure out the movement patterns that need changing. And there will be an adjustment, there will be some active release, there will be something that will give me that instantaneous fix, or release, or change, or adjustment or something that's like pressing the reset button.

Now my job is to start to work those neuromuscular patterns. Because if I want to have lasting change I need to shift up those neuromuscular patterns, or I'm going to have to keep going back for the fix, which is okay. And if I can shift up the neuromuscular patterns, then I don't need to go back as often. Okay, so that is where I'm defining the distinction in this context between fix and change.

Okay, so let's dig in a bit more. And this quotation comes from *The Thinking Body* by Mabel Todd, and talks about the purpose of the shoulder girdle. It's to provide the support for the arms so that they can move freely and powerfully in a wide range of motion without bringing any pressure to bear in the upper part of the chest where the heart and lungs are situated.

Now you're probably wondering, "Okay, what does this have to do with the neck?" Well, when we have support for the arms so that they can move freely and powerfully, and we don't need to add extra pressure or strain to

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the upper part of the chest, that is where many of the neck muscles reside, or there's a very close fascial connection to them.

So when there's freedom through the ribcage and the arms do the work, then we don't have to use the neck as a compensatory pattern. And then the neck can free itself up. The neck can become longer, the neck can become lighter. The tissue in and around the base of the occiput can free up, your jaw can feel better, even some of the tension that can exist in your face in your head. Some of the migraines that might be tension related, like neck tension related, that can settle out. So I want you just to consider that.

All right, so then let's play around with some exploration here. And you can think back or even listen back to the episodes that I did last week and the week before and go back to them newly if you've already listened to them. And get a sense of, okay, I'm going to now move my head, or I'm now going to twist my body or rotate my body, or I'm going to feel this tissue underneath my fingers. All right, how does this all relate?

So if you feel where your shoulder blade is right now, then start to move your shoulder blade, these are the rhomboids pulling toward the spine. Those are what activate to bring those blades together, that and the middle trapezius. And then relax them. And then just do that a few times.

And here's what I want you to notice, when you do that do you jut your chin forward? Or do you hold your jaw? Or do you grip your eyes? Do you actually drive the movement with your arm rather than the muscles between your shoulder blades?

What else are you doing in your movement that is not needed to do? Are you holding your breath? Are you gripping with your toes? Are you pulling with your pelvic floor? This is a very low load exercise so that extra or extraneous effort is not actually needed. So see if you can dial down the effort and still have the same result and have it be more coordinated.

Now do the same thing with protracting your shoulder blade or moving away from your spine. So if you raise your arm slightly and then move that

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arm forward, but think about the blade moving away from your spine without rotating your body. So the blade is moving on that ribcage away from the spine.

But again now notice, does the shoulder want to raise up to your ears? Do you lose your neck? When you pull your blade back into retraction, so you're in protraction with the serratus interior, retraction with rhomboids and middle trap, do you actually try and keep the blade down?

Are you pulling down with the lower traps when you don't need to? Or are you starting to side bend a little bit using the obliques? Or are you getting those lats involved as a way to brace? Can you make the movement just purely retraction for the rhomboids, middle traps, and protraction the serratus anterior?

Now, what you can also do is grab a tennis ball or a massage ball and begin to roll on your back against a wall on the inner border of your shoulder blade. You can also follow around the shoulder blade to the lateral side and just play around with what you feel in terms of the tissue of the shoulder blade.

Some of it might be a bit tender, but this is a way to explore the feel of the tissue. And it's also a self-massage technique that when you finish up even just doing this for 15 or 30 seconds, which might be equivalent to three to five breaths, then come back to doing the retraction and protraction and you might find that there's more freedom there. And that might actually free up your neck a bit more.

And if you're rolling the ball and you're really enjoying it, just stick with it. Pause me for a minute and then just stick with it and just allow yourself to explore the muscular structures with the skeletal structures.

And can you reduce the effort in what it is that you're doing so that when you come back we can explore your elevation and depression. So you can move that blade up toward your ears, that's your upper traps and levator

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scapula bringing that down. And you can also pull your blades down, that's the lower traps.

Now something to take notice of is if you bring your hand down into your lower back, so think about and bring your hands to where the lower ribs are and the upper part of your back at the lower ribs. So upper part of the lower back. So where the ribs meet the lumbar portion of your back.

Are you utilizing the muscles between your ribs and your pelvis to pull your shoulder blades down? What I want you to notice is the muscles don't attach to the blade, They attach to the ribcage. And we want to focus on the blade and pulling that down, that's where those lower traps are.

And lots and lots of people over utilize the muscles between the ribs and the pelvis to do this work. And then they wonder why they start to get lower back pain when they're working with their blades. And that often continues as persistency of neck issue.

So can you let the blades rise to your head and then pull down but only use the lower traps? Only use that and keep your back, keep your pelvic floor, keep all that really nice and settled. Lovely.

So play around with those movements, retraction and protraction, elevation, and depression, fine tuning the coordinated movement between those areas. And in addition, there's a video on YouTube that I'm recording for this podcast where we can explore the pec minor a little more, as well as the lats and how this relates to that arm blade connection and how this primary stabilizing structure has a nice impact through the neck and the head.

All right, so really, really enjoy this practice and the link to that YouTube video is up in the show notes. And if you're interested in exploring more and delving in deeper to whether it's your neck as a client or you are a health professional who wants to integrate yoga therapeutically and have a basis of kinesiology, anatomy, and biomechanics, come, and check out

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Power Of Pure Movement: Unwinding and Unraveling The Neck,
learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck.

That's learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck. Looking forward to seeing you there and we'll see you next time. Take care, bye bye.

If this episode has resonated and you're looking to deepen this idea of getting your body back on board, of listening deeply to your symptoms, of listening to the whispers so you don't have to hear the screams and you're looking for one to one support or professional training, then reach out to us at health@functionalsynergy.com where we can customize your learning path. That's health@functionalsynergy.com. Looking forward to hearing from you.