

Ep #185: Going Barefoot



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With Your Host

Susi Hately

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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 and welcome back to *From Pain To Possibility*, a podcast that helps you reduce and eradicate physical pain for yourself and your clients. I'm your host, Susi Hatley and I'm so happy that you're here today because today I am continuing my mini-series on the feet.

This isn't the first time I've chatted about the feet. My initial mini-series I ran is in episodes 154 to 158. And now I'm back and I've revisited some of the foundational concepts and I've also talked about the considerations about wearing flip-flops and what to keep in mind if you are a major lover of flip-flops and your feet are feeling tight or tense.

I've also taught some simple movement and massage techniques to help explore your feet. And then ultimately, in my signature style, to really see the relationships that exist between your feet and the other parts of your body. Because as with most other things that have persistent nature, you can work with your feet quite specifically. And often there are other factors that are contributing to the persistency.

So with that in mind, I want to explore today about being barefoot, some of the pros and cons and how being barefoot can change up your gait pattern, which might be a good thing or maybe not such a good thing. And then what to consider if you want to transition to being more barefoot. I'll also share a few stories about when I'm barefoot and when I'm not.

So let's begin with an exploration of this topic by exploring foot mechanics. And really briefly, when we think about the foot, what we'll find is 26 bones, 33 joints, more than 29 muscles, 10 of which originate outside the foot but cross the ankle joint to act on the foot, and 19 being intrinsic foot muscles, so working at the foot proper. Plus, there's a whole bunch of tendons and ligaments.

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And collectively all of these enable transfer and dissipation of load enabling us to stand, step forward, step down, step backwards, to the sides, walk, run, jump, come up into our toes and so much more. We want all of these anatomical features to be collectively having enough pliability so that the foot can move smoothly through its gait pattern from foot strike to push off, moving from supination to pronation, to be able to get onto the toes and then back down again, shifting weight left to right, forward and back. Being able to support us whether we are accelerating, decelerating, or standing static.

There is some thought that with shoes with all of the external support, and in some cases a lot of cushioning, that foot pliability can be reduced and that the inherent intrinsic support needed during the movements that I just mentioned is also reduced. And this can lead to stiff and unstable joints, poor muscle balance which can impact the ability to walk, run or climb stairs. And they can also lead to structural changes like bunions, rigid feet, or flat feet.

Now, I'm referring to the shoes that have a lot of external support and in some cases a lot of cushioning. We're also aware of shoes, be that the high heels, that may not have a whole lot of external support but also can impact foot pliability because of the position that the feet are placed in. So these are all the considerations that we're playing with when we're thinking about shoes and the impact on feet.

And it also leads to a question of well, then is it better to go barefoot? Well, if you've been listening to me for any length of time you know what I'm about to say, which is sort of, kind of, not necessarily, but sure, it might be helpful. Ultimately, it all depends on what the mechanics are in the first place. What your foot can actually absorb and change and take on, the relationship between your foot, your knee and your hip and the rest of your body.

Ultimately, the key is that you need to pay attention. For many people when they move from wearing shoes to not wearing shoes, they can change up how they strike the ground with their feet. With shoes the tendency is to

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heel strike whereas when barefoot the tendency is to strike the ground with the mid or the forefoot.

And in some cases this can be a good thing, this striking the ground with the mid foot or forefoot. The load redistribution to the mid foot or forefoot might require more muscle work in the feet and calves, and for some people that will be a game changer in terms of what's going on in the knees and their hips in a positive way.

And the opposite can also happen where more strain can build up through the plantar fascia, the front of the shin and into the knees and the hips. And where and how this might happen depends on what is specifically happening at your foot, the dynamics from your foot through the ankle through the knee and then up to the hip.

So why such different results? Well, it's in part due to the fact that walking requires more than the feet. If you look at the foundational basics of gait, and I talk about the foundational basics as being four key pieces that I like to focus on. And I know that any of you who've got a PhD in gait or spend a lot of time with gait will probably roll your eyes when I talk about just the four pieces because gait really is a truly massive topic to spend time on. And when I focus on these four pieces, so much changes for my clients.

And those four pieces are thinking about your pelvis as your platform, and then the movement of the femur in the hip socket. So the movement of the femur on that platform. And then if you go up, the torso rotation. So the way the ribcage moves relative to the pelvis in rotation. And then also foot mechanics. The focus being that when we can really work with these four pieces, we can start to see how the foot and its mechanics can be so impacted by what's going on further up the chain.

This was really, really clear as day to a group that I was teaching last April during my six day therapeutic yoga intensive where we didn't work on the feet specifically at all. And one of the trainees, who is a pretty avid runner, felt so much more ease in her feet, and yet, as I mentioned, we didn't work specifically on the feet. So she was a little bit mind blown because here we

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had barely spoken about the feet, yet her feet were feeling so much better because we were working on those other four components based off of the work that we were doing in that program.

So it's interesting to really, really pay attention. So many people can have such passion about barefoot and being barefoot, and it can have a tremendous impact based off of even just the few things I've mentioned so far in this episode. And likewise it can be problematic, particularly if you don't have the suppleness through your tissue, if you aren't shifting the mechanics that might be impacting what happens when you go barefoot.

It's a big reason why if you want to move to barefoot, transitioning is really important. So consider the following things when you're considering moving towards being barefoot. Notice your gait pattern from when you're in shoes and then when you're not in shoes. And do this in a comfortable place like being in your home. And also notice this if you're outside, whether it's on a porch or a deck, or whether it's walking up and down the sidewalk that's close by to you and maybe even in the grass.

Just notice how your gait shifts or changes. What do you feel in your leg movement in your pelvis? How do your knees bend more or less in shoes or not in shoes, or even when there's a different surface on which you're walking? Where on your foot do you strike the ground? How is it that you move the rear foot forward to swing that leg through? How do you balance on the opposite foot during that swing-through phase of the free leg?

So really pay attention to how these pieces are moving you in a locomotive type of way, like moving you from point A to point B through the gait cycle. Explore foot mobility work. Like review the basics of massaging your feet, gently pulling your toes, maybe rolling out the bottom of your foot. And then notice the next time when you're walking around barefoot versus being an issue, whether you're indoors, whether you're outdoors, whether you're on surfaces that you're familiar with versus surfaces that you might not be familiar with or surfaces that might be more rocky and they might cut more pokies up into your feet.

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And then just feel what happens the next day. Now, you might be someone who it's like right off the bat it feels good. You also might be someone who right off the bat it does not feel good. But it doesn't mean that it is the thing that you need to do and it also doesn't mean that it's the thing you shouldn't do. It's just you get to notice the mechanics of what is so.

And it's fascinating what you begin to recognize as you keep the movement of where your pelvis is at, where that leg bone is at, how that foot is striking, what's going on with rotation. So to give some real-life examples of this, right now as I'm recording this I'm up at my cabin and at the cabin our driveway is kind of rocky and gravelly. And then we're at a lake, and so when we're walking down to the beach on the rocks there, how do I say it? It's rocky, right?

And early in the season when I'm out barefoot, I'm gingerly stepping on the rocks. Now some of that is merely because I'm a little concerned about how the rocks might feel on the bottom of my feet. And if I can actually just take a breath and just start to walk, it's not nearly as bad. But I also have lots and lots of memories from when I was a kid going out to the cottage and initially kind of my urban feet getting out onto the rocky surfaces and being like, whoa, this is kind of sore. So there's a little bit of history of memory that's there.

But I was out there just earlier this morning and I'm like, you know what? This isn't so bad. And I walked with an almost typical gait that I would normally have in shoes or not in shoes and it was like this feels good. It wasn't, whoa, right, which can sometimes happen. So that's a place, like when I come up here and my feet are getting the opportunity to get a really nice massage walking around on the pebbles and the gravel on the rock, I love it because it's enabling my foot to move in all different directions.

Now, being by the lake there's also logs and other natural environmental types of scenarios, like different sizes of rocks and grass and just all sorts of other environmental, for the lack of a better word, things that I can step upon that will move my feet in different orientations. So my foot will come around a larger rock or a rock that will kind of be poking up, my toes might

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be on one side and my other toes might be on the other side. Or my heel might be on one side and my toes are kind of grabbing and working around it.

So my foot gets a real chance of working its pliability. And it's fun to be able to explore and step around and on the logs and allow my foot and my heel and the arches to be able to mobilize and move around in that way.

I remember when it was early Covid and I had shifted a lot of my work, obviously, in front of my computer. But because I was doing lots of teaching, I found myself sitting on the floor a lot more than I normally would have. And I had this habit of sitting on my foot. But at the time, I didn't notice that this is what I was doing.

And it was March and April in those early phases of Covid and my foot started to get really sore and I couldn't understand why it was so sore because remember, I didn't know that I was actually sitting on my foot. And I was out for a run or doing my yoga practice and I'm like, what is going on with this foot of mine? It is really awkward.

And then it dawned on me one day when I just was like, hey, look at me, I'm sitting on my foot and my foot is in a really contorted position. So I was kind of doing it to myself. And as April turned into May and the snow was melting and there was an opportunity for me to walk on rocks, because we had spent the first several weeks here at the cabin in those early phases of Covid, I was walking on the rocks. And it was super, super stiff and quite sore. But I also recognized why, because of my length of time sitting on the darn thing, right?

So then I played around with walking through the rocks and walking up onto the logs and walking over on the small pebbles and just different sizing and allowing for the rocks to really stick up in between the metatarsals and get into some of those areas that had some particularly strong feelings of tightness and tension. And then I put my shoes back on and carried on my walk.

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But out of doing that, it completely shifted what was going on with my foot. But then I also realized that all of what I had been doing for the number of weeks that I had been so far cooped up inside the cabin, is the outer part of my shin was really quite limited and tight, the upper part of my calf was quite limited and tight. So it enabled me to see other factors either contributing to the foot or were resulting from that foot position. So it was really interesting.

Since then I've really enjoyed taking lots of time to spend in bare feet. It can be in bare feet or on bare feet or just without shoes, and allowing myself to move my feet in all sorts of different directions, but in a very natural way.

So while I'll get in there and I'll massage my feet and I'll pull on my toes and I'll work the feet and the forefoot and the mid foot and the hind foot in a variety of different orientations, what I love even more is being out in the natural environment allowing my foot to just clamor over, like allowing my body to clamor over all the various different environmental obstacles that might be down at the beach or in and around the cabin so that my foot can naturally respond to those orientations. And so can my limbs and so can my pelvis and so can my torso. And I find that to be really, really, really effective.

Now, I live in an environment where there's not a lot of potential dangers of being barefoot, right? There's not an expectation of glass and such and things like that lying around, so I don't have to be uber concerned about that as being a possibility.

Now, interestingly enough, during the same time when the gyms reopened, or the gym that I went to because he was affiliated with a clinic that could have some limited openness during Covid, we had been weight training prior to Covid barefoot. And then with my foot issue that I was rehabilitating myself, I wanted to remain barefoot when we were in the training. But the powers that be had said, nope, you've got to be wearing some kind of footwear.

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So I went out and bought the five fingers Vibram barefoot shoes. And that was really awesome to be able to be barefoot when I was weightlifting because I already previously enjoyed lifting weights barefoot. I found that being able to feel the ground beneath my feet, to really allow myself between my foot and my hips to connect before lifting, I was more grounded, I felt more of the experience as a result.

The five fingers helped maintain that connection. It helped me continue to add more refined infrastructure between my hips and my legs and between my shoulders, my hips and my legs. So it not only maintained what I already worked with prior to the Covid time working barefoot, but also in this recuperation or rehabilitative phase that I was in after hurting my foot sitting on it while doing my work, I was able to regain a lot of the function and the strength and mobility in a very connected way once I got back to the gym.

So, when I work out now, most of the time I am barefoot. I don't tend to sprint, I don't tend to get on to the treadmills or any of those machines. I usually put my running shoes on for those. I'm not quite comfortable just running out on the sidewalk in bare feet. Shoes for all the many reasons that I don't need to mention make more sense in that case.

But there's something very enlivening about being barefoot. And it could be, for me too, because I spend a lot of my time barefoot being a yoga teacher, doing my yoga practice and it's just that my day to day tends to be that way.

Now, with that said, I am not a barefoot lifestyle guru. I do love the various kinds of shoes that I have. I am a lover of flip-flops. I am a lover of my sneakers. And I do have a couple pairs of sexy boots that some might say are not the greatest boots to wear, but I love to wear them. So I oscillate between all of the various ways to cover my feet as well as to not cover my feet and to explore my feet and my gait pattern and the overall essence of myself being human in all the ways that I can.

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So I hope that was a helpful episode for you in terms of considering yourself with your feet, whether you are wearing shoes, whether you aren't wearing shoes, considerations for how you might integrate not wearing shoes if that's something that resonates with you, and what it can do for you, what it might not do for you. And to take it step by step if that's the direction that you want to go.

If what I have shared here resonates with you and you'd like to take this a step further and explore your feet in motion and explore your feet relative to your hip and your knees, your torso and your shoulder girdle, and even your jaw, you will probably really like my upcoming program the Power of Pure Movement: Strong and Supple Feet. It's a six hour program, we begin on August the eighth. 90 minute sessions per session.

You will have homework that you can play with between each session. You'll have access to me to answer questions between all the sessions and we'll really have a great time exploring your foot in motion, but particularly how your foot functions relative to the rest of your body and how the rest of your body impacts the way your foot functions, barefoot or not. So if that interests you, then join me by visiting learn.functionalsynergy.com/feet.