

Ep #203: Reducing and Eradicating Physical Pain: Key Principles For Reducing Compensatory Patterns



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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 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. We're in the middle of a mini-series where I'm digging into some of what I do to help my clients reduce and eradicate pain, and how I train my trainees to have the same results. We've been speaking about the relationship between you and you, meaning you and your body, you and your brain, you and your being.

A technique that I call doing nothing, yes, and the art of doing nothing. The gradient of sensation and obstacles that a lot of people face when they start this process of reducing and eradicating physical pain. I have shared stories, ideas, things that work from my experience working with my clients for almost 30 years, which still blows my mind, and training trainees since 2003.

With this episode, I want to dig into my ideas around compensatory movement and why I think it's such a valuable place to begin when I'm working with my clients, and to give some steps for you to take whether you are someone with physical pain or you are a professional working with people with physical pain. I'm addressing it to both groups because, essentially, my message is the same.

And the reality is, on this podcast I have people listening who are people who are not professionals and have physical pain and I have people who are professionals who have physical pain themselves and are working with clients to help them reduce and eradicate theirs. So let's get into it.

As you know if you've been listening to this podcast for any length of time, in the work that I do, one clear pattern I have consistently seen is that when people who have physical pain reduce their compensatory patterns, their pain levels reduce as well. So really, really clearly, though, I'm not saying

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that compensatory patterns create pain. That's not true. We all compensate, but not all of us have pain.

However, when I've worked with my clients who have physical pain and we help to reduce their compensatory patterns, we see their pain levels reduce and eradicate as well. So a key feature in supporting someone, in guiding someone, in teaching someone is about helping them to feel these patterns and how to reduce or to resolve them.

Now, it's important to note that most of the time these patterns are not in my clients' awareness. And I'm going to explain this in two different ways. The first is that a lot of times clients are mostly managing surface level symptoms or sensations. So, for example, back pain flares up and they have their go-to exercises, they have their go-to movements or self-massage, or professional support to help them relieve that back pain. But the pain then comes back.

And unless there was a specific accident or an event or movement that they did, most of the time they're unaware of what contributed to that pain coming back. It seemingly shows up out of nowhere. This is because the contributing pattern is not on their radar or in their field of conscious awareness.

No big deal, this all happens to us. And it's why having someone with a trained eye and a compassionate heart and ear is so vital to be able to outline or to show where that compensatory pattern actually is and how it might be contributing or correlating to the symptoms that one experiences. It's lifting that patterning from something that's more subconscious into the field of consciousness.

The second group is not unlike the first group, however, in the second group they may very well know that they're compensating. They may have even been told that a certain muscle is the culprit compensator, but they have no idea how to change it. They've tried stretching, they've tried releasing, they've tried strengthening and they've tried stabilizing. But it

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isn't changing, in part, because, at least in part of what I see is the habitual neuromuscular patterning isn't changing.

They haven't been taught how to change that pattern in a way that will actually change the habit. So if you are in the second group, it may be that you're doing the same exercise over and over and over and over again, getting some relief but no significant change. And I'd like you to really know that it's not you or your body's fault. You're just not doing the thing that's going to be the thing to make the shift that you're wanting to have.

So then what do you do? So how I'm going to explain this is in the form of a story, and it's my working with a client who was a powerlifter and she had a quadratus lumborum issue, which she had been told, and she sort of figured out along with being told that it was compensating for a whole bunch of movements that she was doing.

She knew that her pelvis was doing a certain movement pattern and that her shoulder was doing a certain movement pattern, but she couldn't stop it. She tried to brace harder with her abdomen to maintain some control between her ribs and her pelvis. But that hadn't worked. She had tried tucking her tailbone and that hadn't worked. She had tried lifting less weight and that hadn't worked either.

So that's why she showed up in my Zoom room. To use the metaphor of renovation, we started off by basically peeling her movement back to the studs, we gutted it. Knowing that she had a pretty solid full range of motion through the various biomechanical planes, I decided to ask her to both slow down the tempo of her movement as well as the range within that biomechanical plane.

I was working on the common assumption that I have seen over and over and over again, that with persistent patterns of pain we will find some compensatory strategies that if we can then reduce them, things will shift.

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And lo and behold, as she did, we could see exactly where her pelvis started to shift and where her shoulder started to shift, and discovered other patterns that were collaborating with those shifts and were contributing to her current physical state. And one by one and bit by bit, she started to move better, and her pain started to drop.

Okay, so how did this actually work? So let me share it in two steps. First off, in step one, in the movements that I offered her I asked her to only move as far as she didn't knowingly compensate. I asked her to also feel for the sensation of when the compensation was just about to happen and stop there.

Initially she couldn't feel that spot. She could only feel when she actually compensated. So then I began to start sharing when I saw that compensation just as it happened, which enabled her to draw her focus to what she felt in that moment.

Now, interestingly, depending on the movement that we were working with, sometimes what she felt subjectively and what I saw objectively were different. So I might have seen the shoulder begin to shift, but she didn't feel her shoulder shift, but she did feel her breath becoming held. So the breath became the subjective experience that she could tune into, because she wasn't tuning into the shoulder, which is totally fine.

This happens a lot, where what I see objectively does not match subjectively. But actually, the subjective feeling is actually a match because she was catching when she started to hold her breath. She moved only up to the point just before and guess what? Objectively, her movement stayed really, really, really pure. She moved only as far just to the point her breath started to get held.

Now, I want to point something out here that I think is significant. I want you to notice I didn't try to change her to not hold her breath. But rather, to have her notice what the actual bandwidth of her movement to that point just before breath holding was. This is emphasizing that the breath holding isn't

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bad, but rather it's a signal of the available range without compensation. It's the signal of actual bandwidth.

To me, this is very nuanced in some ways. And when I can teach a client how to connect with this nuance everything, and I mean everything, changes. I could go down the rabbit hole a little bit as to why, but all I'll mention about this is so often we are interpreting the things that aren't going the way we want them to go in our body as being wrong. And I want to emphasize with my clients that pretty much everything that's going on in their body is exactly right and it's a signal.

We might not like the signal and that's a whole other story, and that's okay. That gets our attention, right? But it's not something that's bad. It's a signal. It's a communication strategy. It's a conversation starter. So now what I can say is, all right, here's the end currently. Now, let's move to step two.

From here, she can take this new level of awareness back into her powerlifting with the idea of what's happening with her shoulder, with what's happening with her breath, the relationship between her non compensated range of motion and her actual range of motion, knowing that she has potential and possibility for actual range of motion and she's working out these compensatory strategies.

She comes back the next session and here's what she reported. When she was doing certain lifts, she felt herself brace with her breath, right? She remembered, she remembered the bracing pattern with her breath. And while this breath holding pattern is not uncommon with powerlifting, she just decided not to do that given what she had learned in our session together.

So she initially dropped the weight that she was lifting and practiced not holding her breath lifting with lighter weight. What she noticed, not surprisingly, is that there was less tension as she lifted. But she also started to feel what I had seen, which was she could feel her shoulder kind of get into it in a hitchy kind of way.

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So then she played with let's only lift the range or the distance and use the amount of weight where she didn't have to brace with her breath or feel that hitchy-ness in the shoulder. She went on to say that what she noticed was super cool, that she felt more grounded and that her movement felt more coordinated and more smooth.

And as an experiment with this new level of understanding and new ideas and feelings happening in her body, she decided to add more weight. In just one weightlifting session based off of one session of recognizing that she had this thing about breath holding and a shoulder hitch, she was able to come back to her almost normal powerlifting weight with better mechanics, simply because of what she was now aware of.

It came down to what she was aware of and acting on that awareness. All from me asking her during our session to slow her movement down, to decrease her range to a non-compensated range.

In my mind, what happened here is that this enabled a new input or stimulus into her system. And it's an example of how over and over and over again, that when we give our bodies the stimulus or the input it needs, it will respond in kind very, very, very quickly.

Said another way, if we give tension to the body, guess what it gives back? When we give ease to the body, guess what it gives back? Yes, give it tension, it brings back tension. Give it ease, it brings back ease.

She was able to shift up her neuromechanics, and then the dynamic between her body and her brain and back to her body changed. If this sounds simple, it's because it is.

Here are the takeaways. First, for the clients who have pain and you're seeing professionals, when you've been given exercises to do pay attention to your movement patterns the best that you can. To the best of your ability, yeah? Ask the health professional who has given them to you to

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watch you move and to ask them to help you become aware of where you're compensating.

If they're unable to do this, because not all health professionals are trained in this way, I highly recommend putting the camera on on your phone or on your computer or using a mirror and just notice what is meant to be moving, and is it? Or is there something else happening? A really common one is starting to hold your breath. Or just notice where you're gripping.

Like if you're bringing your arms over your head, do your toes need to be involved? Does your jaw need to be involved? Do you need to hold your abdomen tight or your pelvic floor really hard? Look at the areas or feel for the areas that tension is starting to increase. And can you move in the range where you're not doing those things? Even just one, just start with one.

And from that notice what then you then notice. What are you now aware of? And take that awareness, take that information into the activities that you currently are noticing have some level of limitation. So maybe you're a runner or maybe you're a cyclist and you're going out for the run or a ride and certain things happen.

So now notice, what you notice during your exercises, is that movement pattern or is that gripping pattern, is that tension pattern, is a whisper of that patterning showing up on your run or on the bike? That's where you start to play, then you can start to become super curious. And in that state of super curiosity, your system starts to down regulate.

Maybe you're someone who goes to the gym, maybe you do yoga, Pilates, maybe you're a quilter or do pottery. Maybe it's in the garden. Maybe it's getting down to the floor and playing Lego. It could be any number of things, but can you simply notice when these things start to arise? And they're letting you know that you might be close to your bandwidth. Not that you have to stop the activity, but you might need to change up how you're doing it. And let all that information guide you.

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Now also, if you happen to be in a certain space and you've got time available, maybe you can back off of it. Maybe you can stop, breathe in, tune in. What else are you noticing?

Now, here's a bonus tip. This truly is all for you to discover. I'm on this side of the mic, I'm not in your body. Even if I was working with you, I'm not in your body. You and your body are the ones that are in relationship. And believe me, please, it's an invitation perhaps, that your body is really trying to engage with you. It's really trying to communicate and to trust what it's saying.

To the health professionals listening to this, when you're providing exercises to your clientele, if you've got the time – And I know sometimes it's really difficult depending on what sort of environment you're working in, it can be really, really difficult to teach someone about their movement, even though you really want to.

So a couple of things you can do if you're unable to do that, is to simply ask them, where else are you holding tension in your body when you do the movement? And can you do the movement only as far as that tension doesn't happen?

Notice if you have a certain commitment to having your client do three sets of 10 or three sets of 20. And notice where that commitment is coming from. Over the years of my working with clients, what I have found when they have been given a requirement of three sets or two sets of whatever number of repetitions, it's not the three sets or the two sets of whatever number of repetitions that actually helps somebody.

It's the way that they're moving that helps them more, because someone can knock off three sets of 10 and compensate all the way through and not create new neuromuscular patterns. So notice what level of commitment you have to that number. And that can be a guide, for sure, and allow them to feel into it.

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So years ago, I gave up the three sets of whatever. And even ask any of my clients, they'll be like, Susi does not give me the number of reps I should do. What I do is I ask them to feel their body. And when that tension just starts to rise, that's when it is to stop. And if they can even catch it a bit earlier, that's when it is to stop. So maybe it's two reps, maybe it's 10 reps, maybe it's 20. But that's for them to discover.

I've also utilized the technique of I would like you to do the movement as far as you can easily breathe. So notice when your breath becomes a bit more haggard. And just before that, that's when you get to stop because when the breath starts to become more haggard, we tend to be in a new or a different state of our neuromuscular system relationship. Our nervous system might be moving more into a rigid, stiff sort of state, and that's not really helpful for what we're trying to create with somebody.

So those are all little ideas of what you can do to support your clientele. And then the other piece you can add in is suggesting to them to pay attention to when these things arise and whatever that activity is that they're doing. That is when you really make the gains for somebody.

So now what? What next? I've got two options for what you can do next, depending on where this resonates and how this resonates. The first is you can explore more of this on my Facebook or YouTube page. I've got tons of videos that I was filming on a daily basis back during the pandemic. And they're all housed both on YouTube and on Facebook.

And if you do a search for the Back to Basics, those typically happened on Thursdays if I remember, there are a lot of really simple ways of moving there that you can explore. Really perfect for clientele who are wanting to explore better movement. And then if you are a health professional and you want some ideas of how I'm incorporating this, then go there. Those are good places to play.

Then if you want a deeper dive, I am running the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive this October 28th to November 2nd, where you get to spend six

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days with me to really tune in to how your body is moving and learn the fundamental concepts that I am teaching my clientele, so you can then work with these with your clients.

This is an embodied practice. So yes, there are slides and there's a little bit of lecture, but I'm also teaching you and you are moving your body. You're not sitting in front of the computer screen for all of the training. You are doing movement for pretty much 80 to 90% of it and experiencing it for real in your body.

I'm teaching other people in the group, so you can watch me actually teach. And if you want to be someone I'm teaching, I will teach you too. That's totally an option. But you will learn, you will see, you will experience. It's a tremendous six days, which I have been doing for 20 years. 20 years I've been running this. I would love for you to join me. So you can learn more there at learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive. It would be a great, great honor to share more with you there. Take good care

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.