

Ep #217: Mechanics of Breathing Part 3 – Exploring Your Rib Cage



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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. I'm so glad that you're here because today we are continuing our exploration of breathing and its relationship with TMJ issues and sleep apnea, and our topic is on the rib cage. Now, we've already had a conversation around setting a baseline in episode one. And then I filled in more around my more holistic whole-body view in episode two.

And today, as we get a little more segmented on the rib cage, I want you to keep in mind the relationship to the whole. This episode will provide you with some intellectual theory as well as a practice. So as you take yourself into the practice, just consider how your rib cage is moving and what you're noticing elsewhere and what you're noticing with your breath.

So many of the holding patterns and compensatory strategies that we all have are off the radar of awareness. And when somebody can guide us through a practice or they can watch us move, they can help bring awareness to what it is that we're doing.

And so because I can't see you move and I can't provide that piece of it for you with this audio, what I recommend that you do is if you're starting to notice something as you go through some of the movements that I'm sharing is maybe just look at yourself in the mirror, or put up your phone and film yourself. I know it sounds kind of goofy, but it really is very, very helpful.

It's one of the things I found so beneficial when we started doing so many more Zooms during the pandemic, is people could watch themselves in movement on the Zoom camera. And they got to be able to see so much more about what was contributing to the things that they were experiencing.

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So it's an offer I have up for you, if that's something you want to do for yourself in order to bring some of what might not be in your level of awareness into that conscious awareness. All right, so let's get into it.

The rib cage, I find it's truly fascinating for so many reasons. And especially in the context of this mini series and the context of breathing. It houses a lot of the respiratory system, we've got the primary muscle sort of near the bottom, the diaphragm. And then there's also secondary breathing muscles that attach to the upper ribs and then up onto the neck and so on to the skull.

So when we're not breathing really well, whether it's due to a condition like asthma or in some cases allergies or TMJ issues even, or there's obstructive airway issues, or we're having a really tough time getting air in because of other tension patterns in our abdomen or our pelvic floor, then we have a way through these secondary breathing muscles to get air in.

The rib cage is also really interesting in how it acts as a bracing mechanism. I remember way back in the days when core stability training was becoming popular in yoga and yoga classes would have their requisite 15 minutes of core training. And at the end of that 15 minutes there would be this collective sigh in the room. I would giggle sometimes because what I realized is that those folks were not doing core training, they were doing breath holding.

And as I saw more and more students and trainees who had been involved in a lot of core work back when core work was really gaining some traction, I was seeing that they had actually more tension in around the tissue of the ribcage and actually less control and coordination, which is what core stability is meant to provide, right? It enables us to go from fast to slow and slow to fast and get down to the floor and back up again, change orientation, and that wasn't happening.

So there was more tension being built up, than actually suppleness and responsibility. And a lot of that was held in the rib cage. So with today's

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practice I want to help bring attention to your rib cage and give you an opportunity to have a different experience.

So if you want to get ready for the practice prior to setting a context with some intellectual information, you can grab a rolled towel or one of my spinal strips if you have one handy. A rolled towel will do the trick though, or even a blanket. So you can pause me while you grab that prop.

All right, I've mentioned earlier that one thing that's so fascinating about the rib cage is how it can take on a braced state, especially when we're not doing core training really well or when we ourselves are in a braced state, when we're in a stressed state. And it's not uncommon for the rib cage to hold tension in and around the ribs and in and around the armpits, down and around the solar plexus. And those will all lead us to utilize secondary breathing muscles to get the air in.

So part of my client work is supporting my clients through their whole body, so that other body parts that are meant to be more online can actually come online. And that can give more support to the rib cage for a chance for it to let go or some of the tissue to let go or unwind. Because just asking for a bracing pattern to let go is a tall order.

I have found that the bracing patterns letting go comes about a lot more easily when there's more support. Letting go is a result of more support, more often than not. And when it initially starts to happen, then bit by bit someone can settle out more and more. And more and more of those bracing patterns that may have been long-standing compensatory strategies that have become habituated, they can settle out more and more.

And as a client starts to notice their breathing improving, it's not uncommon for them to also notice their TMJ issues shifting and them being able to get more restorative rest and better quality sleep. So part of the process toward this outcome is growing your awareness so that you can learn about what

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might be contributing to the patterns that are currently not working for you. And that's what this practice, in part, will support you to do.

I'll walk you through utilizing the towel or blanket or spinal strip to connect into the way that your rib cage is feeling, how it relates to other parts of your body and what they're feeling so that you can help create a more cohesive whole. So we're playing around with that rib cage in context of the whole.

What we're going to begin with is taking the towel and rolling it up into a roll. And we're going to place that towel alongside our rib cage and we are going to sideline over it. So place it about the midway point on the rib cage. So there's a very gentle side bend happening here.

Now, you might find if you're used to doing a practice like this that the rolled towel is not going to be enough. So if you have a small bolster, a small bolster, not a typical yoga bolster but a small bolster, you can use that as well. But the aim is it's creating a little bit of lift, even if it doesn't feel like a lot. It's creating a little bit of lift.

And just be easy. You can place something right underneath your head or even just your arm under your head. And easily breathe. Just notice now how your breath is coming into your body and leaving your body.

Now, if you find that lying over this there's a little bit of soreness on the bottom hip, you can always place extra padding under that hip. Now lying here, notice where you feel the breath being easy. So does it go into the ribs pointing to the sky easily? Or does it go into the ribs on the towel easily? Which one is easier? Different people will find one side being easier than the other.

What is it for you? And then focus on where you notice the breath being easier. And, of course, if doing this practice at any point is increasing tension anywhere in your body, you can make the roll less or come off of it

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completely. Keep noticing where that breath feels easy coming into the ribs, allowing your focus to be there.

Okay, take two more breaths and then roll on off and then lie flat on your back. Now notice what you feel from one side to the other. And then begin to roll over to your other side, same thing, placing the roll underneath the ribs to the halfway point, making sure that your shoulder is really easy on the floor. And if you need something underneath your head, you can use a pillow or a block or your arm.

And once you're settled, again, notice your rib cage and where it's easy for that breath to go. Which ribs? So is it the ribs pointing to the sky, or the ribs that are on the blanket or the towel? What's interesting is sometimes for some people, the ribs, no matter which side, it's easier pointing to the sky. For other people it doesn't matter which side, it's the ribs on the side of the towel.

For other people, it's the ribs that on the first side were pointing to the sky and then the same set. So say it was the left ribs up to the sky in the first round, and it's the left ribs which are now on the blanket or the towel for the second side. So it becomes really interesting to notice that it was easier whether those ribs were up or down.

So again, I'm not saying that it means something. Although that data does provide some meaning and some significance, which we'll get to explore as we continue the process. If you're someone with some TMJ issues or other breathing issues, you might even notice a distinction as you notice where the breath is easy and how you feel in your jaw or in your face. Again, just allowing your attention to focus on where the breath is easy.

And then in a couple of breaths, slowly come off of the prop and lie flat on your back and notice what you now feel. In some cases, lying on one side and allowing for even the gentlest of side bends enables some release through the side line of the body. And it doesn't necessarily mean you felt a

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stretch or you felt a release, but more so that it's a stimulus that enables for a change to happen in the side line.

And then when you lie back, you will feel perhaps the response in your body. Sometimes it's along the sides, but sometimes it can be in the lower back or in the upper back or up through the head. Which can be a bit mind boggling at times because it's like well wait a second, I didn't do anything to those areas. When in fact, you did. Because you shifted up the way this 3D structure that is your body, how it moves.

So tissue along the sides of your body, as it gets stimulated or activated or released, whatever the word is, that has an impact on other tissue. If your rib cage now starts to move a bit better subjectively or somatically, you might not notice that it's moving better, but you do notice freedom in your back or freedom in your upper back.

And one reason for that is because there is tissue like the quadratus lumborum, the psoas, the lumbar spine as the structure that integrates so intimately with the rib cage and the tissue at the bottom of that rib cage, namely the diaphragm. So when you free that sideline up, you can free up the way that rib cage moves, which can free up that lower back musculature.

Same idea for the upper back musculature. If we're really ratcheted down, not even really, just a little bit through the sides of our body, again, we might not even notice somatically that we are doing it, but when we have some release through that side where we can feel, it might even be the upper part of the body, it's the area that responds to that change that happened in the lateral line.

Sometimes this can be a little challenging to get one's head around because we've been so trained to stretch the thing that feels tight. But so often, the thing that is feeling tight is not the thing that is actually the thing that needs to release. It is tight, because other areas of the body are not

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doing what they're meant to be doing. So it is holding tight to hold us together.

So now we shift up other parts of the body, it gets the signal of saying, hey, I don't need to be as tight anymore, and then settles out. Now, this does make for a bit of a kind of a brain rattling moment of like, well, then how do I know what I'm supposed to do to support this area that is tight? That's what this mini series, in part, is about, is understanding that sometimes the process of our conditions that we experience and the way that our tissue is in our body, is not this linear $A + B = C$.

But rather our system, our body and our mind, are this self-regulating whole body and mind system. And we simply need to settle in and be gentle, and allow for what arises.

We can do the same thing with this next exercise where you can take your towel, and have it be a length where you can put one end at about the midway point of your thoracic spine. So it's about the area of T7, T8. If you wear a bra, it's right in the area of that bra. If you think about the bottom of the breastbone, it's directly opposite the bottom of the breastbone on the backside.

So we lie on our backs, having the towel under our back with our head on the top. Now, if you have my spinal strip, you can use this with a double fold spinal strip. You can also use a rolled mat as well, and again, just place it at the area of T7, T8, the point opposite your breastbone and again, if you wear a bra, where that bra comes around. If you wear a Polar heart rate monitor or a Garmin heart rate monitor, same idea, right around that area. And then lie back.

Now, lying on whatever you're lying on, you might then feel some strain through your back or through your neck or around your shoulders. If that's the case, you can either lower it, so if you're on a double fold spinal strip, take it to a single, or unroll your mat or make the towel a bit smaller. Or you

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can lift your bum up a little bit and place a small something under your bum.

One of the reasons that when someone's in this position that can be contributing to some tension or strain or numbness or tingling is that we're asking the body to come into an extension or a backbend. And your body might be able to do it, because you got there, but the tissue might be hanging on for whatever reason.

So when we shorten up that line by lifting the pelvis a bit, that can put some ease into the tissue that is saying, hey, it's too much. So find the place, even if it's normal for you, find the place where it can be more easeful because if you train strain, tension, tingling, et cetera, et cetera, you will continue to have it. And my experience has been that if I can provide someone the opportunity to train more ease, less pain and less strain, that is what they'll get more of.

So allow yourself the opportunity to experience the possibility of less tension, of less strain. Because especially when we're looking at something like a TMJ issue, or a breathing issue, or tension all through the face or in through the upper part of the rib cage, so much can change when we give it the correct or accurate stimulus. So if you're adding strain, you're going to give yourself more strain.

So then find yourself in this position, even if you think you're not doing anything, that is the perfect place to be. And now notice yourself breathing. And be easy, thinking of it like waves coming in and going out. Allow yourself to really settle in onto the towel, the strip or the mat.

It's very common, I find, for my clients with a TMJ issue or a sleep apnea issue, or tension up and around the head or behind the eyes to also be limited through this front line of their body and how the rib cage connects down to the pelvis, how the head connects to the rib cage. And sometimes what can happen is as they free this up along the front, there is an ability

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kind of born within where that rib cage can move better with the inhale and exhale.

Because when you think about it, the ribs are meant to move in all directions; forward and back and out to the sides. The image that is often used in the breathing text is that the ribs are like bucket handles, and they move away and up or up and away. And if there's tension there, that movement of the ribs won't be happening. They'll be closer towards a locked down or hardening or resistance or a brace or a grip.

Keep settling in here to the inhale and the exhale. And then after another two or three more breaths, roll on off of what you're laying on and just lie flat on your back and notice what you notice. For fun, after this episode is over, you could even come on to your sides again with the prop under the ribs like it was before and then notice as you're laying over that prop if how your ribs are moving is different now compared to when you did it the first time.

And then when you're ready, gently roll on over and come into standing, feeling the three points on the bottom of your feet; the center of the heel, the ball of the foot, and the base of the pinky toe. And if you're feeling a bit wobbly, which sometimes happens when there is a release on the sideline or on the front line, then move into a small wall sit. So with the wall behind you, a small mini wall sit between the knees and the ankles. Really mini, like you could be here for 30 minutes. Really mini.

It's just a matter of helping to reground because when we start to release some tension or holding patterns in an area that they've been held for quite some time, sometimes our proprioceptive ability feels a bit off as it finds itself in this new space without utilizing this particular holding pattern. So coming into a mini wall sit can just kind of help ground and reconnect in a new way.

Now, if you are noticing that your breath feels different or that tissue through your body feels a bit different, I'd love for you to take a moment

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and name what this means. And if you're finding yourself saying, well, I just don't have the pain there, or the strain is reduced, or something feels different, I want to just push you gently and say, hey, can you name this state?

It's such an important piece to the process because when you notice this new state and you don't affiliate it to the strain or the pain or the tension, but rather its own state in and of itself, so maybe its ease, maybe its lightness, maybe it's grounded, maybe it's freedom. I mean it can be anything.

I've had people call it peace. I've had people call it slim, soft, solid. Then now you've got your new state and then you can start to notice when those tension patterns start to wiggle on back and you can feel the whispers of them so much more clearly.

And then you can come back to the practice and then see what happens as you practice it again, and again and again. Now finally, it's not so much that it takes time, it's more that it takes practice. And when we practice in a consistent way, with awareness and not just knocking it off our to-do list, then real change can happen, and in a lot faster timeframe than you might imagine.

If this is resonating with you and you want to dig in deeper, we talk a lot more about the rib cage and things we can do with the ribcage at the connecting points to the skull and down through to the pelvis and how this impacts the breathing mechanism when it comes to sleep apnea and TMJ. I would love, love, love for you to join me at the Mechanics of Breathing program that's happening this January. And you can read all about it over at functionalsynergy.com/breathing. We'll see you next time.