

Ep #228: Shoulder and Whole Body Connection: From Grumpy to Happy Dog



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hatley

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hatley

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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 today because today we continue the shoulder mini series and we're speaking specifically about the topic of downward facing dog. Now, as you know, I'm all about helping people to reduce and eradicate persistent physical pain and get back to the activities they want to do. And this mini series is really just another way into the conversation.

Shoulder function is so essential to our day-to-day life and physical activity. And this series is about helping you to explore how the shoulders function. And if you are a teacher or a health professional, it provides ideas on teaching your clients how the shoulder functions so that pain can reduce and eradicate. Because a lot of our role helping our clients is teaching them about how these things are working in bodies. And so that they can feel how it's working in their body and tune into how it's working in their body so they can make the change that needs to be made.

So with downward facing dog today, really, what I want to dig into is how we can specifically turn a grumpy, painful dog into a chipper, happy, light and playful dog. Now, I got this kind of cute, chuckle worthy moniker of grumpy dog from a participant who was in one of my past runnings of the I Love Anatomy program. But the reality is it's actually quite serious, right?

So many stories I've heard from yoga teachers and yoga therapists and other people who practice yoga who've had issues in their wrists and elbows, compression in their shoulders, strain in their back, hamstrings, knees, and even in their ankles. Truly, pain and strain is no laughing matter.

And what confuses the issue even more is that in many styles of yoga, downward dog has often been considered a resting pose, right? So that

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can be super confusing and really lead to like the harumph kind of experience, just like a grumpy, grumpy dog.

So what do we do? Well, a key to enabling a grumpy dog to return to its happy and playful self, is to recognize and understand the function that's required to make downward dog the dog we want; easeful, stable, supple, strong. To do this, one thing I find to be super significant and very important is to recognize the necessity for teaching function, not form.

And you've heard me say this in many different ways, many times, and it bears worth repeating. The focus is not the pose, the noun, but rather it's to facilitate movement from point A to point B. And I want to support the movement in a range that's more pure, with less compensation, so that the person that I'm working with can evolve into the actual range of motion that exists in their body.

So let me unpack that just a little bit. So when people come to see me who have physical pain, they all are compensating. All of them. Now, are they compensating because they have pain? Yes, in some cases. And as human beings, we all compensate and we might not have pain.

Compensation can be an excellent strategy in order to get something done. Where it really starts to become, I call it a problem, is when there is pain. Or if the mechanical patterns, which are really not super efficient and effective because different parts of the body are doing things that they're not meant to do, that can just lead to a more reduced bandwidth and contribute to just a whole host of limitation of function, which can contribute to or correlate to physical pain.

And when I am helping people reduce those compensations and move better, there is a strong correlation to their pain going down. So that's why I'm saying here, more often than not, people have a much greater range when I'm meeting with them, but that range is very much compensated.

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And so when they bring their range more into a place that's less or no compensation, they're initially stunned by how little their movement is. And I'm not suggesting they stay in that movement, but rather help them improve their function so that they can actually live into the movement that is available and with less compensation, yeah?

All right, so what I see time and time again is moving with less compensation is correlated with better awareness, more control and coordination, a greater understanding of what contributes to pain rising, and then, as a result, overall, less and less time experiencing pain, right? Because as someone notices the things that contribute to their pain going up, they can make changes so that doesn't happen. So then they have less and less time experiencing pain.

Then out of that, strength very, very naturally arises, but it's the kind of strength that is more supple, nimble. There's some agility to it rather than sort of holding ourselves together with tension or strain.

And probably the most significant result is that people are not waiting or wondering what they're going to do next, like if they're going to go into downward dog next, if it's going to set off pain, right? There's sort of that braced anticipation, but rather they're feeling more interoceptively and proprioceptively what is going on in their body.

So said another way, they have a greater ability to tune into sensations and connect to what those sensations are communicating, and being aware of where their body is in space. And these are really significant contributors to building confidence with their body, that key word being with, and an improved relationship with their body and less pain.

So really, the experience here is tuning into your function, recognizing how you are moving, noticing where your compensation is, and if you're willing, to move at a range with less of it, but then also start to improve your function so that you can grow that range of motion quite organically.

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So, again, how does this relate to downward dog? When we learn to tune in to the way that I've described, it becomes quite clear why many practitioners are having difficulty with downward facing dog. So much of the time, they simply don't have the available function to do the pose. Now, this doesn't mean they never will. In fact, if they learn to move well, they'll improve their function very, very quickly.

You see, the key thing about this is that when we compensate function by borrowing from another area, we're asking another area to do something that it is not designed to do, right? So when someone goes into dog and they don't have the available function, whether it's in their shoulders or in their pelvis or somewhere along the chain through their body, they might round or arch their back. They might hang into their elbows or their shoulders. And this can then turn into a situation of whack-a-mole.

So they might round their back, for example. So then they go, oops, I better not round. So they start to arch. And then when they arch their back, something happens with their elbows and they go, oops, I better not be in my elbows. So I'm going to press through my fingertips and push the floor away, which might have the position look better, right? We're now talking about the noun of the position.

It might look better, but we're adding more compensations on top of the initial compensation patterns. And this can lead to further issues in the neck, the shoulder blades, and cultivate less function and more compensations. And then we start to layer upon layer upon layer upon layer. And the result then is that your dog becomes more grumpy and your body communicates via pain and perhaps injury that all is not well.

So then now what? How do we get out of the mindset of doing the pose, the noun, move toward a place where we're thinking more about movement and improving function, and have our downward dog become a happier version of itself, a version which loves to come to the mat?

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A key component is to recognize that we are working with the architecture and the biomechanics of the body. And to move in a downward dog, the following is required from this inner architecture. There needs to be flexion of the humerus or the upper arm bone at the shoulder joint. There's upward rotation of the shoulder blade. There's hip flexion. There's knee extension. And there's ankle dorsiflexion. Now I should add, this is the movement pattern if we're coming into downward dog from tabletop.

And if you don't have these movements available to you, you won't be getting into the pose with ease or with suppleness, stability and strength. Now, I include all of these body parts because even though my focus through this mini series is on the shoulder girdle, how the hips, knees and feet are moving into this position will absolutely impact how the shoulders function.

So to explore what I'm speaking about with this podcast episode, let's get into a short sequence for you to explore your dog, how you're moving into dog, and perhaps explore some of the functions. There are two props that you need for this particular exploration.

One is either a rolled yoga mat or one of my spinal strips. If you don't have either of those, then a rolled up blanket or a towel that would be about the height of a rolled mat. And then also if you have a buckled strap or a tie or a bathrobe tie. Something that you can hold onto with both hands.

All right, let's get going. What we'll begin with is exploring dog itself. So come into your version of downward dog. And just notice what it feels like. After exploring your downward dog, come onto your back and grab hold of your tie or a buckled strap and place it between your hands and have your hands approximately shoulder width apart.

Now, you decide on you and your body about what makes the most sense. And then from here, start to move your arms over your head. And again, as you're doing this, notice if your ribs want to go with you or whether your arms windshield left and right or your elbows bend as you move. Notice if

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your pelvis wants to get involved. Just notice what is happening in your body as you move your arms overhead.

And the movement itself is really only the arms coming up overhead. And so if you notice your ribs starting to move or your pelvis or your jaw getting tight or any of that sort, can you do the movement without those things happening? So only moving as far as it's just the arms moving in the shoulder socket.

And maybe do this two or three times, because remember when we come in a downward dog, this is the movement that we're doing. The hands are on the ground, so it's slightly different, but the movement is flexion of that arm bone in the socket.

Okay, so now we're going to move into laying on the rolled mat or the spinal strip or the rolled blanket/towel. So place the edge of the mat or the strip or the towel right at the base of the breastbone. So if you wear a bra, it's right in that bra strap, or if you use a heart rate monitor, it's right in that area, right below the bottom of the breastbone. That's where the edge of it and then your head is going to be resting at the other end.

So laying on the mat, have the strap handy, take a few breaths just to settle and feel. And then take the arms overhead again. And just like before, be aware of your ribs. Notice any movement of your elbow that's more than what it started as. If you started with your elbows straight, notice if they want to bend. If you started with your elbows somewhat bent, notice if they want to now straighten.

So can you keep the movement at that shoulder? Notice if your pelvis or your jaw wants to get involved. And can you move only as far as those things don't get involved? And, of course, moving in a range that doesn't increase pain. Okay, just move up and down, maybe five or six times. And when you're done, take a moment and then roll off and come back into your downward facing dog and notice if there's anything new or different in the experience of your dog.

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All right, from this downward dog, we're now going to come into a child's pose. So imagine you're in child's pose and your arms are reaching out in front of you and where your hands are reaching or pointing toward is 12 o'clock. And you'll move your arms toward one o'clock. So you'll create a bit of a side bend in your body, trying to keep your pelvis quiet. And after about two or three breaths, bring yourself back and then side bend over the other direction. So bring your hands over towards 11 o'clock.

Now, after doing each of those, return to your downward facing dog and notice what it is that you feel. Anything new or anything different? And when you're ready, come back down and let's move into the third movement, which is coming onto your back, bringing one knee to your belly and moving into a supine twist.

So as you bring that leg to your belly and you move into your twist, the shoulder that you're moving away from, allow that to stay on the ground. You don't need to anchor it. You don't need to pin it to the ground. Simply move your leg across, moving into your twist, only as far as that shoulder and that shoulder blade are gently, gently, gently on the ground.

There's no need to force. Force is one of those things that it's so organic in our world when there's force and resistance, like the heels are kind of digging into the mud, right? Kind of think of a dog that does not want to move somewhere and we're trying to get it to go somewhere and it's like, no, right? We don't want to kind of force or push or pin that shoulder to the ground. That can create more resistance and more friction.

And then when you're ready, come out of this twist and then into the other side. Easy, easy, easy. Super. And then come on out of this and then back into your downward facing dog. And again, notice what is new or different. How are you feeling the parts of your body are now moving?

Can you tune in interoceptively to the sensations that are being experienced in your body, noticing what is new or what is different? Do you

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notice your body in space, how it's moving? Do you notice any difference or anything new there?

And then when you are complete with this, you can either lay back on your back or come up into standing, have a walk around. And again, notice what you are experiencing.

Now, if what I've been teaching through this episode has really resonated with you, you might love my upcoming Power of Pure Movement: Strong and Stable Shoulders. We begin February the 20th and you can learn more at functionalsynergy.com/shoulders. It would be an honor and a pleasure to work with you. Have a great time exploring and we'll see you next time.