

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hately

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

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 I'm talking about interoception, what it is and how I specifically use it when I'm working with my clients and what I see and how I see its role in reducing and eradicating physical pain.

As a brief introduction, interoception is commonly defined as the ability to sense and interpret internal bodily signals. With a quick Google search you'll find things like how it improves the awareness of sensations like heartbeat, hunger, thirst and temperature, and how this feedback allows us to understand more so our physiological states and emotional experiences.

I don't typically do that kind of work with my clients. Moreso I'm helping them tune into their bodies, so how I tend to explain it to my clients and with my trainees is that we're utilizing our sensing state where we use our right brain to sense into our body to enhance our awareness of our internal state.

It's powerful for slowing us down and from a very specific neuroanatomy perspective, it can quiet that logical executive functioning of our prefrontal cortex on the left side and also can quiet the fear or concern that can often be exhibited from our left-sided amygdala. It helps us become more curious and exploratory, both qualities that are found to be involved in a parasympathetic state of our nervous system, which is necessary for healing and recovery.

So all in all, with that brief, brief neuroanatomy, it's very effective and necessary for healing because in the work that I do, what I'm doing is helping people to grow and improve their neuromuscular coordination, their neuromuscular control. So there's a play between what's happening

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

neurologically and what's happening myofascial. So it's necessary and really important to be able to feel into this.

So it won't surprise you at all to hear that I spend a gargantuan amount of time with my clients to build up this interoceptive skill because of how necessary it is for their recovery and rehabilitation. I'll go so far as to say that there will be massive friction for recovery without building this skill. It's that important and that significant to the healing process.

So it's not uncommon for a new client who has been given an exercise protocol from somebody else to come in and say, okay, I've got this exercise protocol and I'm not really sure I'm doing it right. I'm not really sure I'm making progress. What do you think? This is a great example to show where interoception plays in.

Now I will say before I get into this example that I will be blending in proprioceptive awareness here as well because we are talking movement. Movement involves knowing where our body is in space. So there are elements of proprioceptive awareness here as well as interoceptive skill. So there is a little bit of layering happening here and I'll make commentary about where the interoceptive piece is.

So first of all, what typically happens in an example like this is someone has the program. There's often a series of sets and reps and they're knocking it off, but they're not making progress. Some of these programs will have clamshells, some bridge poses, maybe some rotator cuff work. And the key thing that I notice is they're not really paying attention to what they're doing. They're not sensing into their system.

So they're not really tuned into where their body is in space. That's the proprioceptive bit, but they don't even feel what's going on. That's the interoceptive bit. They're not really noticing if there's pain or not pain, strain or no strain, but maybe after they do the program, there's like tension. There's interoception. They might notice pain, there's interoception.

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

But they weren't tuned into it while they were doing it. They might even say something like, well, I didn't really feel anything while I was doing it. It was only after I did it that I didn't feel quite right, but I sort of think I need to keep doing this.

Okay, that's so classic there. And what I used to say quite frequently is that you didn't feel something while you're doing it is probably more so because you haven't been taught how to be aware or what to be aware of while you're doing the movement. So it's a really great opportunity for me to be able to teach them about the dynamics of their movement and then walk them through this idea of feeling.

So have them feel, walk them through and give them space to feel, and then have them learn how to express that. The cool thing about this is that I'm teaching them this skill of feeling. And feeling is not something I can see. It's their wholly own subjective experience that they're tuning into. So it's a brilliant and dare I say, beautiful process of someone coming into that rhythm of being able to tune in and feel areas of their body that they probably haven't really spent a lot of time considering and haven't been taught how to consider.

So I'm not making any changes to the program per se, unless there's something that is very grossly seemingly out of line. I'm just helping them feel what they're doing while they're doing it and what sensory experiences arise as they do it. And more often than not, they develop a really cool awareness subjectively of how their body feels in a way that they didn't recognize before.

So now their clamshells all of a sudden become alive. The bridge pose actually engages the glutes and not their back. The rotator cuff work actually works the rotator cuff and they're not bracing through their ribs or through their QL and they feel so much taller and lighter, both interoceptive experiences.

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

99% of the time when I work in this way, when someone has brought in a program and they're not getting the results, but they want to do it and they're just not sure about how to go about doing it, when I work in this way of growing their interoceptive skill, their pain goes down.

So now the person can feel what is actually happening. They can see the connection to their pain going down. And as a result, they can feel their body making progress. And even more importantly, they are using their ability to tune into their body. They are the ones doing this to themselves. Do you see how empowering, totally empowering this is?

And if I could put it in a way, I'm helping them to train themselves to be their own body whisperer. Do you see the power in that? They don't need me per se, they need themselves. They need the growth of the skill of tuning into themselves, where all the information lies, and then learning to be able to discern what that all means.

Their growth in interoceptive skill improves their ability to feel, to perceive, to sense. They can tune into when tension arises, when pain starts to trickle in, and then make changes to retrain that habitual patterning. It's powerful. And it's really clear how interoception is so fundamental to the process of getting well again.

There's a lot of clarity and confidence that can grow when someone grows their interoceptive skills. I have found that for so many people, where the pain is, is not the problem, and the actual problem is under their level of awareness. So again, interoception becomes vital, this ability to tune in and direct to what you aren't aware of, which sounds impossible, I know, but I'll get there. This idea of interoception becomes vital, or otherwise the client will just chase surface symptoms. They'll address surface issues and not actually address the thing that needs to be addressed.

Let me give you a personal story on this. Earlier in a recent episode, I shared about how I'm retraining out of hypervigilance. I've been supporting

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

my husband, who has PTS and hypervigilance from being a firefighter, and we went through some particularly rock and rolling dark times where I was the one really vigilant on him because I could sense and perceive when episodes were going to hit before he could.

So I had trained up this hypervigilance sort of state in myself. And in the summer I started to recognize I didn't need it as much anymore because he was now becoming more psychologically and physiologically stable. He was able to more tune in, and he was building out his own interoceptive skill. So I was now in a place where I could start to retrain myself out of this state.

And I remember being on my bike, and I was riding along, and I was hitting up into some increased power output. And I felt the inside of my pelvis think like the muscle tissue on the inside of the ilium. And it just got really tight, and my breath went into this uhh kind of experience, and I couldn't output the power as I thought, and I started to have some really fast heart beating.

So I was very interoceptively aware of what was going on, and I could feel and I could sense that this was not what I actually wanted, obviously. And interestingly, there was also a relationship to my hip and to like the fundamentals of my core stability. My hip, my left hip was getting super, super tight in and around the hip joint.

And interestingly, since that episode, as I've improved my depth of core stability, as I've improved my hip, as I've continued to train out of hypervigilance, I wouldn't even say that I display hypervigilant behaviors now, but what's interesting is my pelvis and my breath have settled down. Like the tissue in my pelvis and my breath have settled down when I ride. My hip has freed up. And as I've been doing that, my power output and the length of time on my bike has also improved.

So being a bit of an interoceptive nerd that I am, I wasn't quite satisfied with, okay, great, now my breath is great, my vigilance is being retrained

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

more and more, my hip feels great, I can ride really well. No, I was like, well, what was contributing to my hip? I think it was more than just what was going on with my breath and my neurological patterning of hypervigilance and all of that.

And I started to notice as I was on my bike, as I was getting tired, there was another little pattern that showed up. I noticed that the right side of my rib cage was doing a little bit of a funky sensation. And I can't really explain what the sensation was. It wasn't specifically a tightness or a strain or any of the normal words, it was just something funky.

My hip was fine, my pelvis was fine, my breath was fine, but there was a sort of whisper in and around my rib cage and a little bit into my shoulder. And I'm like, huh, what's happening here? And I noticed ever so slightly, my ribs had moved, my rib cage had moved slightly laterally to my right. I noticed my hand had slightly supinated. So the palm had slightly turned up and was no longer hanging onto the handlebar. It was slightly turned up and I noticed that my right shoulder had slightly dropped.

I'm like, isn't this fascinating? And just because I'm an interoceptive nerd, I kept going, doing what I was doing. And lo and behold, I started to feel something in my hip. I'm like, oh, isn't this cool? So my rib cage and shoulder and my hand was the whisper to which my opposite hip responded. Huh. So now I had more awareness of what may be contributing to some of what was happening in my hip.

So then I started to play around with the mechanics over my ribs and my shoulder, and I started to clue into other patterns yet again. Now, a few weeks later, I'm that much more tuned in to me riding. My riding is stronger. I'm riding for longer and I'm recovering even more quickly.

A similar story can be told about a client who had chronic headaches and auras. And she had been a referral from the headache clinic here in Calgary. And as she explored and learned about her interoceptive skills,

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

and this time I was working with her through movement, we were doing some shoulder movements and pelvis movement, a little bit of breath.

It wasn't just about bringing her down through body scans and breath. It was tuning her into how her body felt as she moved. Where she could feel tension patterns. Where she could feel straining patterns. What were the neuromuscular mechanics that were correlated to what was happening in her head?

Very quickly, she was able to tune into a relationship between her shoulders, her pelvis and her neck. And her neck was the thing that precipitated a headache coming on. So if something started happening in her neck, it was like a sure signal a headache was around the corner.

But also interestingly, when she had the headaches that also had auras associated, there was another sensation, which at this moment I don't remember what it was, but there was another sensation that kind of showed up for her that would let her know that that was coming down the pipe.

Now here is what's interesting, is that she was able to tune into her mechanics, improve her mechanics, and out of improving her mechanics, that neck, the bandwidth that she had before her neck started to kick in in response to whatever other environmental factors were out there, whether those were internal or external to her, she had more and more bandwidth, better ability to respond, so her neck became less and less involved. And the whisper associated with aura, it didn't come up nearly as often.

When she was able to tune into the way that her body was moving, what she was feeling on the inside, so again, I'm blending a bit of proprioceptive and interoceptive here. It's sort of difficult just to be interoceptive when we're adding the movement piece. But the point being is, she was able to tune into her feeling self. She was able to map out more of the trajectory which led to what she felt in her head.

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

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

Again, here is a great example of my helping her tune into and become more of her own body whisperer. She developed that powerful capacity in herself to the point where she still has a tendency toward headaches, but yet she experiences them so rarely now.

I'm hoping when I'm sharing my story and this client's story, that I'm highlighting this capacity to perceive, how vital and significant this capacity to perceive is, and then how they can utilize that data, that interoceptive data to be able to serve them, to be able to get well again. To really put it into practice so they grow a bandwidth, they grow better functioning, they grow better habitual patterns. As a result, there's greater confidence, greater clarity and a deep, deep well of internal support.

And let me tell you, in the world of pain and pain reduction, that internal support, that internal sense of support, that feeling of, I've got this for myself, my body is not out to get me, I'm in partnership with my body, my body is actually giving me indications that it's asking for help, is paramount to being able to continue to reduce or eradicate symptoms and to get back into more complex activity. Like in my case, getting back on my bike for longer and harder pushes when I ride.

If you're someone who is beginning this process of sharing interoceptive skills with your students, that you really want to be very conscious about how you go about this, it's not just the shavasana at the end of a class, it is paramount and significant, I'm using those words a lot in this episode, for you to grow the skill in yourself. This has got to be something that has lived, lived experience.

So consider then, just sensing into your breath right now. Take a moment and feel yourself breathing. Feel your inhale coming in and your exhale coming out. Notice how you are sitting or standing, wherever you are in space right now. Maybe your feet are on the floor or your pelvis is sitting on a chair, notice the contact with the floor and or the chair.

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

And notice the inner corners of your eyes. And then come back to your breath and notice where you feel your breath moving in your body. So is it moving your belly or your rib cage? Maybe you feel the breath coming in through your nostrils.

The idea here is where are you feeling the breath already moving or where it feels open in your body. Easy to sense. And allow your attention to linger here on where it's easy to feel your breath. And continue to focus gently on where and how you're feeling this breath moving and being open in your body.

Some people will notice that they notice more openness because of this focus on just noticing what's already open or moving freely with their inhale and their exhale. And because of that focus, more of it shows up. You might even notice a calming or a slowing down and perhaps words other than the ones I'm using.

Take another five breaths here. And then consider how you now feel and how you might take this feeling into the rest of your day.

I sometimes will share with clients when they feel better after the first session to notice how much longer they feel better. How might they be able to bring this better feeling into the rest of their day? And to also notice when this better feeling begins to fade because that is as much about the interoceptive experience, whether it's when it fades or now that it feels good.

Because when you can tune into when the feeling fades and you can watch how much time passed, like what's the length of time that feeling good happened for, then you have a baseline. So when the person comes back the next time, now we've got a baseline we can build from and we can continue to work at improving their capacity to feeling good. But I couldn't do that if they didn't know how to feel in the first place.

Ep #283: Feeling Within: The Power of Interoception in Reducing and/or Eradicating Pain

So again, that's why it's so fundamental to be able to grow this skill. And again, if you're a new teacher, or even a longstanding teacher, who hasn't really thought a lot about how to bring this about or struggles with bringing this about with your clients, or maybe your clients are really heady and have trouble becoming aware or trouble feeling, playing around with this notion of interoception can be very, very effective.

And if you want to take it further, the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive is a place where I dig into this a lot. And I work with a number of different case studies outlining what I've just mentioned, people who have trouble feeling, people who are very much in their head and how do you help them get there?

Or people who really, really push or people who are going 5 million miles an hour, how do you even bring them down to 4 million miles an hour? How do you help them slow down? Like, how do you help them even get into this place to feel in the first place when it seems all signs are pointing towards that's something that they don't want to do?

We deal with all of that and work with all of that in the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. And you can read more about that at functionalsynergy.com/intensive.

I'll be talking more about interoception and especially helping your clients become their own body whisperer in the upcoming episodes, so do come back and I'll show more about how you can improve these skills with your clients by first improving them in your own self and techniques and ideas of how you can build your skill set as a teacher. So I look forward to having you back. Take good care.