

## Ep. #320 - The Shoulder Isn't the Problem: Tracing the Real Patterns Behind Pain



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With your host:  
Susi Hatelly

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

Introduction 00:00:01 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.

Susi 00:00:22 Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here, because today we are getting into a case study of sorts with a client of mine who came to see me for shoulder issues. And what became really clear is that the resolution of her issue had something to do with the shoulder, but not a lot. And so this episode really is going to open up and expand on the way that I'm thinking, so really a peek inside of my brain, and in how I was working with this particular client. As you listen to it, whether you are a teacher, a yoga teacher, or a massage therapist or other health professional who utilizes therapeutic approaches or Yoga approaches to helping people reduce or eradicate pain; or whether you're someone with pain.

Susi 00:01:09 This really is speaking to you and for you. So take what resonates and try it out for yourself. And if you want to dig in more at the end of the episode, I've got some suggestions on where you can go next. So let's get going. If your neck is tight or your shoulder feels like it's doing too much and you've foam rolled your way into temporary relief, you are not alone. You are also not broken. Today's episode isn't about a quick fix for shoulder pain. It's about what happens when we follow the thread from the shoulder to the ribs, to the pelvis, to the breath, and even to the way that we've been organize ourselves for decades. This is for the part of you that wants to understand movement, mechanics and anatomy, to know why your levator scapula is always lit up, or while your shoulder blade won't lie flat or while your neck gets tight every time you work at your desk or raise your arm overhead. It's for the part of you that really wants to finally understand what's going on.

Susi 00:02:13 And it's also for the part of you that already knows; knows that something deeper is happening. That maybe, just maybe, your shoulder tension isn't just about the shoulder. This episode is about real sessions, real compensation, and real change. Because when we stop chasing symptoms and start seeing systems, we begin to understand pain as a portal and not a problem. Let me say that last sentence one more time because these words are really important and significant, I think. When we stop chasing symptoms and start seeing systems, we begin to understand pain as a portal and not a problem. So let's begin. Let's start where most people do: with a shoulder that just won't settle down. The shoulder might be loud, it might be screaming, but it's actually not the source of the issue. My client came in with all the classic signs: right shoulder pain, chronic neck tightness, the familiar tug up the side of her neck, left scap always on. And here's the thing she was strong and is strong. She trained regularly.

Susi 00:03:33 She had good awareness. She was certainly not new to this. And yet something wasn't integrating. She had been to physio, tried massage, then scapular stability work. She knew where and what the serratus anterior was and is. But nothing stuck. The symptoms consistently returned. As we slowed things down and watched her move. The pattern began to reveal itself. Her right lat was pulling hard. Her ribs were locked down and in. The right side of her pelvis was bracing. There was no real room for her diaphragm to descend, perhaps. And

when the breath can't move, neither can the shoulder blade. Her thoracolumbar fascia was taut, like a tent pulled too tightly. Her scapula was no longer gliding. It was yanking, hanging, doing its best to stabilize a system that was unorganized below. When she raised her arm and you could see this the flare in the ribs, the subtle tuck of the pelvis, the tension in her jaw, each movement pulling the next. Each layer of compensation, trying to hold things together.

Susi 00:04:43 This wasn't chaos, nor was it something to fix, as surprising as it might sound, but rather I saw it as choreography, a deeply practiced, finely tuned pattern of over efforting. So instead of simply doing stuff we didn't jump into exercises, we didn't try to mobilize the scapula or activate the serratus instead, we watched and listened and got curious because even though all the things that I was seeing, and even though we saw this beginning as a shoulder problem, this wasn't just a shoulder problem. And all those other things that I mentioned that I had seen, that wasn't a problem either. It was a story told through her body about effort, protection, and a brilliant system doing whatever it could to function. The moment we brought attention to her breath, the moment we invited awareness into and between her ribs and pelvis, helping those segments become more coordinated and smooth, something shifted: her shoulder stopped screaming. Not because we fixed it, but because we stopped blaming it. That's the moment of change. When the body realizes it's no longer being punished for trying to help.

Susi 00:06:14 When we stop thinking in terms of problems and start seeing the compensation for what it is: a creative masterpiece. The shoulder wasn't broken. It was overworking. And that is brilliant. A brilliant, creative way to get something done. Yes, the shoulder was also exhausted, but it was the last place her body could call for help because everything beneath it had sort of gone offline. So let's dig into this idea of compensation not being a mistake, but rather an amazing and creative masterpiece. Here's where I think a lot of people misunderstand pain. They assume that it's something to eliminate. They assume compensation is something to eliminate, as if it is a mistake. But the way I like to think about it is that compensation isn't a failure at all. It's function. It's your body saying, I've got this, even if it's not perfect, not always efficient. Actually, it rarely is. It's rarely pretty, but it does work in some form until it doesn't. So in my client's case, her outer hip was locking in.

Susi 00:07:30 Not because it was tight, but because it was trying to stabilize a pelvis that had, in a sense, lost its bearings. Her right lat was getting all involved in a compensated way, because the serratus wasn't really quite in a smooth, coordinated pattern. Right foot, which had had a long healed fracture, wasn't rolling or softening, so the adductors were clenching to help her balance. Compensation wasn't the problem. It was the body's best attempt to stay upright, functional and most importantly, safe. The goal here was not to undo the compensation, but rather to ask better questions. Questions like: what isn't supporting her that the shoulder is trying to manage? Where is load transfer going a little haywire? And what's missing to enable that to be smoother and more coordinated? How is your system organizing for protection? And what if we gave it more support? What happens when we give it that better option? This is the beauty of the therapeutic work that I do, that I teach, and that I train others to learn and apply with their own clientele.

Susi 00:08:59 It's not about correcting. It's about revealing. You see the pattern. You soften the noise. You give the system space to reorganize. In her case, we actually began with the foot reintroducing dorsiflexion and seeing what would happen with the load response. And then we moved up to the outer hip. Inner thigh responsiveness. Sacral mobility. Working with pelvic stability. Mobility. How those leg bones are moving in the socket and then how that then connected back down to her foot. Every step was a conversation, every shift, an invitation to the nervous system saying, hey, you know, you don't have to do it the old way. And slowly her system started to settle and we could see her starting to choose differently. Not because she was consciously trying to correct and not because I told her to, but because her system finally could trust a new way of organizing. This is when compensation turns into clarity and healing starts to feel like freedom. Let's talk about breath for a minute. And I'm not talking about diaphragmatic breathing, actually, but rather this rib-pelvis relationship and how this relationship makes breathing safe, efficient and coordinated.

Susi 00:10:45 Because when the rib cage is braced, whether it's equal and just the front ribs are tucked solidly into the abdomen, Or maybe it's down and in on one side. Likely the diaphragm can't descend fully. Now, I can't say that for sure because I'm not inside someone's body. I can't see what the diaphragm is doing. It's an assumption that I like to hold gently. And with that assumption in mind, when these things are happening with the ribs tucking in tightly, whether bilaterally or unilaterally, the body will find another way to get the breath in. Enter the neck, scalings, upper traps, levator scapula. They help the air to come in and make the breath. Breath not because they're meant to, but because the body is intelligent and adaptive. If that primary muscle is not working as well as it could to bring the air in and to enable the breath to do what the breath does, We've got these secondary amazing breathing muscles to do exactly that. And in the case of my client, when movement becomes survival, the shoulder in a sense becomes a breathing station, which is why we brought in breath. Not pranayam, not control, simply space.

Susi 00:12:17 And we used something really, really, really simple. We did a block supported bridge pose and added a really gentle side bend in this position. And so she lay on her back with one block underneath her pelvis. Knees were bent and she rested, and then slowly she moved her right foot out to the right and then slid her left foot toward it. And in doing that, moving her legs in that way, she brought a subtle curve, subtle side bend to her body. This wasn't a stretch. It wasn't intended to do any kind of stretching. It wasn't about flexibility. It was about reintroducing the ribs to the pelvis. Letting the nervous system know, hey, we've got you. And if you feel safe, you can stop holding. And in those moments, being in that side bend, her breath changed. It deepened. Not because she tried harder, but because there was finally room. And as the breath settled back in, the rib cage started to find ease. And as we moved into other movements, we started to notice the scapula moving better on the rib cage, the upper traps softening and the levator scapula releasing, not because we went after it to release it, but because the body no longer needed to hold everything up.

Susi 00:13:51 That's what integration looks like. Not more doing, but rather less effort. Doing all that you need to do and nothing more. One of those in the right place at the right time moments.

At one point in the session, she paused and said something that I hear all the time. You know this makes so much sense, she said. I've done so much relief work and it does help, but it never does stick. But this time it feels different. Those previous moments, those previous times, they weren't failures. They did provide information. Ultimately, what they told me when my favourite lines is that her body could change the fact that a release happened means that her tissue can change. But until this session, there weren't the tools to enable that change to stay. Because release work alone oftentimes isn't enough. Yes, it's a stimulus. It can interrupt the noise, it can provide relief. It can open a window. If we don't step through that window with new movement and actually re-train the way that our brain and our tissue interact, the nervous system closes it really fast.

Susi 00:15:02 The brain isn't just looking for sensation, it's looking for evidence. Evidence that a new pattern is safe, repeatable and integrated. So that's where we went next. We connected this release with re patterning, and we began to use movements to enable that to happen. And interestingly they had little to do with the shoulder at all. Well not directly we played with some more twisting. Allowing her to rotate her ribcage. Not from the shoulder though. The ribs and other ribs connected to the pelvis. Because those obliques, those obliques are the fuel of the twist and they help move the ribs relative to that pelvis. And here's what happened: in a really good way, her outer hip lit up. In a really good way, I'll emphasize. It wasn't because we were trying to isolate a glute, but rather it was reactivating a chain from foot to pelvis to ribcage to scapula and neck and head. We then brought in a theraband not to target the serratus, but to show what's possible when the levator scapula is no longer running the show.

Susi 00:16:23 And slowly but surely, that serratus began to show up not by force, but rather by invitation. That's the kind of change that sticks. It's not a single exercise. It's not a trick. It's not luck. It's a shift in how the body communicates. That moment when the nervous system says, this. Yes, this I can use. That's what we're after. Not temporary relief, but durable clarity. People will talk a lot about the pelvic floor and the pelvis and how it holds stories, tension, trauma and support and all of that is true. But we rarely talk about the shoulder girdle in the same way, and yet it holds so much too. Effort, vigilance, postural pride, the need to reach, carry, contain. The bracing before a hard conversation. The tension of waiting, of performing, of pushing through. With this client, that story was written into a lot of the scapula hitching, the breath holding, even some of her... what we'll call "failed attempts" to stretch the neck. And as we worked, it became clearer and clearer.

Susi 00:17:49 And I see this with so many clients. What was gunking up in her shoulder wasn't just myofascial connections or disconnections, it was a lifetime of over efforting with nowhere else for that effort to go. She had done the core work, she had done the shoulder rehab. She'd even tried relaxation. But it wasn't until we got to integration from ribs to pelvis, from ribs to foot, from head, neck, ribs, pelvis to foot that her body began to soften for real. Because integration doesn't just change movement, it changes meaning. Her shoulder was no longer a battlefield, it became a messenger. And as that message was received, as she heard it, without trying to override it, her body had a chance to reorganize. That's when her serratus really began to settle in and coordinate where it began to sequence better, her levator scapular finally became quiet,

her diaphragm seemingly it's seemingly because again, I'm not inside of her body to see it it seemingly moved better. Her breath deepened.

Susi 00:19:01 She talked about her spine feeling more decompressed. She added that her shoulder seemed to stop carrying what her pelvis forgot to hold. That's the magic, truly. Not in fixing, but in making space. The key here is that knowing isn't just intellectual. It really is embodied. So many people come to yoga therapy, to functional movement, to kinesiology because they want to know what muscle is this? What cue should I give? What drill will fix it? And there's nothing wrong with that. Not at all. But eventually, something deeper starts to speak. The knowing shifts from mental to... let's call it cellular. From what do I need to fix; to what do I sense now? And that's where the real change begins. Because what we're really doing isn't fixing a shoulder. We're helping a system reorganize around coherence, around clarity, around presence. She didn't need a more complex protocol. She needed her own body's awareness to come back online. And when that happened, that serratus, it integrated its sequence. The scapula move better, the shoulder softened, breath deepened, and the ribs and pelvis were better connected.

Susi 00:20:25 Not because of what she learned in her brain or in her mind, but because of what she felt in her body. If this episode is speaking to you, whether you're a teacher, a student, or simply someone trying to make sense of what your body is saying, I want you to know something. It's not too late. You're not too late. You're not too stiff. You're not too weak, and your body isn't broken. What you're experiencing may be compensation, yes, but it's not dysfunction. It's not failure. It's adaptation. Creative, masterful adaptation. And that adaptation can change. If you were this creative, if your system was this creative, then it can be creative again. This is the invitation to stop chasing the pain and start listening to the system, to soften the effort and strengthen the signal. I see the shoulder not as a problem, but as the brilliant communicator it's always been. If you want to keep exploring this work, not just learning about anatomy, but feeling it come alive Inside of you.

Susi 00:21:48 There are so many ways for you to dig in. You can explore the power of the rotator cuff for refining load, healing, scapular clarity, and this relationship between our arm and the ribcage. What's really going on here? You can learn more about that at [functionalsynergy.com/cuff](http://functionalsynergy.com/cuff) and if you're a teacher and you want to dig into a university level movement lab where we bring together biomechanics, anatomy, breath and intuition for real embodied understanding, your step is I Love Kinesiology and that can be found at [functionalsynergy.com/ilc](http://functionalsynergy.com/ilc). Whichever path you choose, know that it's not about fixing your body or your client's body. It's about learning to hear it and as a teacher, learning to see it. And whatever you hear, whatever you see, to trust it. To move with it and not against it. Because your body is already wise, already capable, already ready. You don't need to brace against your life. You can soften. You can strengthen. You can move in a way that feels like a full body "Yes."

Susi 00:23:26 Thanks for listening and we'll be back next week. Keep sensing, keep unwinding and keep letting your body speak. Thanks for listening. If today's episode sparked something. A curiosity about movement. A deeper question about your teaching. Or a sense that there's more

to see beneath the surface of a pose? You're not alone. I Love Kinesiology is where we go next. It's where yoga teachers learn to see movement patterns, clearly understand the nervous system's role in strength, recovery and compensation, and to teach from a place of grounded, embodied knowing. You don't have to memorize more muscles. You don't have to cue louder. You just need to know what you're looking at. And I'd love to show you how. You can visit [functionalsynergy.com/ilik](http://functionalsynergy.com/ilik) to learn more. And as always, keep listening, keep feeling, and keep teaching what's real. See you next time.