

Ep #108: Yoga Therapy and Lymphedema



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Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hatley. 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 Hatley.

Welcome, and welcome back. With this episode I want to speak about lymphedema from one particular angle. And that is how can you reduce the onset of lymphedema post cancer treatment, and through that process connect with your body in a whole new way?

This episode really is as a result of the work that I've done with people post cancer treatment. And those people, the reason they've come to me is because they want to reconnect with themselves. Some of them are utterly annoyed, angry, and I'll say it, pissed off that their body has created this. Others of them are so inspired that their body has healed so well.

Two sides of the spectrum, lots of people in between. And they want to regain and build upon the trust. They want to connect to their body as a way of transformative healing process. So no matter where they're at on the spectrum of what they feel about their body through this process, they all know that reconnecting to their body is a vital part of the process of recovery and of healing.

So that's what this episode is about, we're going to be speaking about some of the history of cancer and exercise. We'll be speaking about the functional lymphatic system and things to pay attention to. But understand that it's all in the spirit of helping you to reconnect with your body.

Because if there's one thing that is said to me consistently from people who have been through the cancer process is that it was remarkable at hammering away their inner sense of knowing. And they want to be able to reconnect with their wisdom, with that inner sense of knowing, with their kinesthetic sense, with their intuitive sense. They want that back.

So if you are that person who is going through treatment, this is for you. If you have a loved one going through treatment or is almost done treatment,

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this is for you. If you're a health professional who works with people post cancer, this is for you.

So what's interesting about this is that when you look at the history of exercise and cancer recovery, the history is not that long. I remember when I created a cancer program, a cancer recovery program utilizing yoga for researchers at the University of Calgary, I came across some research that was not very old at the time which looked at dragon boating for women who were post breast cancer surgery because back in the day it was believed that heavy lifting post breast cancer surgery would lead to lymphedema.

Well, the researcher at University of British Columbia figured well that was ridiculous, and decided to use something like dragon boating to really prove the point. And lo and behold, what they found was that not only did it not increase lymphedema, in some cases it reduced lymphedema. And that then spawned this whole movement of dragon boating and also a whole bunch more research into exercise, not only post treatment but also during treatment.

So our understanding about exercise and cancer has changed so, so dramatically. The things we know for sure about exercise and post cancer experiences is that it can help reduce the weight, it can help improve strength, it can help improve mobility, which has a huge impact on other factors. It can also reduce fatigue, it can reduce insomnia, it can also improve scar tissue management when you've had that experience of an incision and things taken out. It can also improve mood and attitude.

So it has so many benefits in addition to the physiological benefits that we know to be true. A key factor though is how do you know if you're doing too much? This is not a time in our life where we ought to be mind over matter, not for my clients anyway.

And I want to emphasize that of course I'm speaking from the perspective of my clients because that's my experience, is a lot of the people who are coming to see me are pretty motivated. They're pretty ambitious and driven, and if anything, they aren't going to do too little, they're going to do

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too much. So it's really about helping someone tune in to that body wisdom and allowing that body wisdom to inform them for when they are going too hard.

So in light of that, let's discuss a bit about the lymphatic system and how it functions. Functionally speaking, your lymphatic system moves lymph. And lymph is a watery fluid that starts off as blood plasma and it's leaked out of your capillaries in the process of the exchange of nutrients and gases. So that which gets left behind is essentially mopped up and absorbed by the lymphatic system to bring it back to the circulatory system.

And along the way, the lymph is inspected, it's cleaned, and it's filtered. So you can see that it's not only vital for your immune response at keeping the bad guys out, it also helps the cardiovascular function because the return of this interstitial fluid back to the bloodstream is so vital for blood pressure and all things related to cardiovascular function.

Now, here's the important thing, there's a key element for that lymph getting back to the cardiovascular system, muscular contraction. The lymphatic system is stimulated by moving your muscles. The contraction of your muscles becomes the pump, which helps push that fluid back to the core of your body. So it's an important feature to getting the lymph back. So if you're not moving it's going to be harder to get that fluid back.

But again, as I've mentioned, we can overdo movement. And particularly in a case where you've had a lymphatic system damaged, either because lymph nodes have been taken out, or a lymphatic organ has been taken out, or the lymphatic organ has been damaged, or there's been radiation, that can all impact the function of the system. So we need to be able to tune into when we are overdoing it.

And initially, if you're someone who is a mind over matter, you know, go at all costs, this can sometimes be a little bit challenging. Which is why I want to share some of these signals to pay attention to in order to make sure you're staying within your lane and your lymph can move back easily and that you don't overdo it and then fall into a trap of getting lymphedema.

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Now what's important to note is that the people that I've worked with, I've had people who've had one lymph node removed, no radiation, and tons of lymphedema. I've had people who've had multiple, many, dozens of lymph nodes removed, and radiation, and have had no lymphedema. So the lymphedema coming on as a result is not correlated to the number of lymph nodes taken out or the radiation applied to the lymphatic system.

So that's why you have to be conscious of where your mind goes about the surgery that has occurred, it's not related. Which, again, is why we need to tune into how the body is moving and how the body is functioning. Which is why I like to come back to the key principles that I share with my clientele, nurture relaxation. Really improve your level of awareness of the process.

As you're moving, really think about pure movement. Reduce your compensation patterns. Notice when you're holding your breath, or you're bracing, or you're gripping, or you're utilizing areas of your body that don't need to be used. So are you gripping your toes? Are you clenching your jaw? Are you kind of locking and loading in order to do a movement? And can you bring more, this will be interesting, fluidity to your movement?

Right? The fluidity of your movement, think about that. How if you bring fluidity of your movement, you could very well be enabling better fluid function through your system. So tune in to how you're breathing, what your eyes are doing, what your mouth, your jaw, if you're over contracting through your abdomen or your pelvic floor. As you become more aware of how your body tissue is functioning, it will really tune you into how that lymph is flowing back through your system from the periphery to your core.

Along those lines then, consider if the exercise that you're doing is nurturing and nourishing. In some ways it's too bad that when we think about exercise, we think about a workout. How motivating is, all right, we're going to do a workout? But when we think about movement or exercise as being nourishing and nurturing, how does that land for you?

Now I've got to be careful because some people listening might say, "Yeah, but a workout is way more motivating than nourishing and nurturing." I

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understand, I totally understand. But just notice what drives you into the movement that you're about to do or the exercise you're about to do. And can the way you're thinking about it tune you into the tissue dynamics at play?

As I mentioned, can you bring more fluidity and nurturing to your movement, and that can have an impact on the fluid nature of bringing that lymph back to the core of your body. Ultimately, the idea here is to tune into this notion that your body doesn't lie. So think about what you're experienced in your body. Don't disregard it and allow that to be signals to let you know when you need to change the dial of the effort with your exercise.

Here are some other signals and signs to pay attention to. The first one is if you take a look at your hand and you look at the fingers, and you'll see where your fingers connect into the palm of your hand. Look at the back side of your hand, you'll see that you've got Knuckles and then ridges, valleys and ridges. When those valleys, if you now fist your hand and you'll see the valleys between each of the knuckles.

If you're moving too hard and fluid is starting to build up, you won't see those ridges, those will fill up. Your shirt might become tighter or your arm might swell into your shirt. You might feel a heaviness in your limbs. Your ankles might become more swollen. There might be heaviness or a fullness in your limbs. There might be puffiness, or pins and needles sensations. There might be a bursting sensation. There might be an increase of size of one limb compared to the other side.

If you've had abdominal surgery there might be tenderness in the groin or bloating of the abdomen. There might be swelling or heat in the area of the incision. There might be an aching in and around the area of the incision or where the cancer was that makes no real sense. The jewelry that you're wearing might feel a bit tighter, and there might be a decreased mobility in the wrists and ankles overall.

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So when you can start to pay attention to those signals, those are likely letting you know that the lymphedema might be on the increase. And so you can simply modify from there and just tune into your movement patterns. I can't tell you the number of times that sometimes those signals have arisen and when someone started to move better and reduce their compensation, or simply improve the way they were breathing, or moved in a range where their breathing was easy, and those symptoms faded away.

So it could simply be a change of effort that makes the change. Or how you're moving and improving the purity of your movement and reducing your compensation that makes the change. So I want to emphasize that, because it's not that something terrible is about to happen. But rather it could be an indication about how you're doing your movement that is important.

So see what that feels like and how that resonates in your system. Overall the aim here is to be able to sense into the signals that let you know that lymphedema is on the rise, signals that let you know the fluid is not coming back to the center of your body, that maybe the myofascial system is not working as well as it could, or the structure or the architecture or the way that the lymphatic system is functioning is just not at its top form.

And what's important to realize is even though it's not at its top form, change can still happen. And the way I want to describe that is in relationship to a facet joint deterioration, or osteoarthritis, or disc protrusion. Those are three examples of degeneration and I'll have people come to me concerned because they want to move better, but they have these weaknesses now within their system.

And it's true, there is an element of weakness here. And when we can have them move better, that moving better, that breathing better, helps overall their function of their body. Muscles start to move better because we're asking the muscles to move better. When someone is compensating, remember, we're pulling from an area that's not supposed to be involved in the movement pattern. And as a result, the whole system becomes weaker.

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So the more that we can help people move better and move within a range where their breathing is easy, and cultivate this idea of ease within their system, they will become stronger. Their system will function better and I see it time and time and time again.

So that area of weakness doesn't become an essential limitation. Yes, it still exists, but now they learn how to move better, how to mitigate the impact. From what I've seen over 25 years of working with people, no matter what their condition, it is a similar impact for people who have a risk for lymphedema post cancer treatment.

When I can support them in being able to recognize their body whispers, when I can support them in tuning into their body so that they can feel when the possibility of overdoing arises and they learn how to shift that, they start to recognize a whole new level of strength and of ease, and of connection to their body and to their brain, to their anatomy and to their physiology. And an overall depth of quieting starts to emerge. Way less worry, much less concern.

So your next steps as you move toward choosing exercises that make sense for you, pay attention to your body. As you start to move, notice what happens through your breathing. Notice what happens through tension, or gripping, or bracing. Can you do those movements with 10 to 15% less effort? And then what happens? What do you now notice in your system? What can you now perceive? What are you now aware of?

If this resonates with you and you would like my help to support you in your post cancer recovery care, do reach out to us. We have two programs that you might like, easily downloadable, follow at your own rate, less than \$50. Send us an email to health@functionalsynergy.com and Kia can help you out.

And if you want to take it further and you would like to work with me one to one, same thing, fire off an email to Kiyah at health@functionalsynergy.com, we would love, love, love to help you reconnect to your body, reconnect to your breath, and help you reconnect to that wisdom inside.

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All right, have a great one. 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.