

Ep #124: Why Focusing on Better Posture Does Not Improve Pain



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hatelty

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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 delighted you're here because today I want to dig into this notion of posture and pain. There are these conversations I hear inside of yoga, and fitness, Pilates, and some circles of rehabilitation where I hear people talking about how posture is a real source of pain for people. And that if we simply improve our posture, pain will go down.

And with episode I want to explain why I disagree with that and what I feel is a more accurate view of posture and pain which is more empowering and enables us as a practitioner to meet clients where they are at. So if you are a health professional you'll like this from the perspective of sort of just noodling through posture scenarios and is the posture really the issue?

And if you are not a professional and you're thinking about your own posture, I hope that this provides some really interesting ways of thinking about your own body and the layers of who you are and why your posture is perhaps what it is and things that you can consider.

If you find that this is really inspiring and you want to work with me more there are currently two ways to do that. So one is we can set up one to one series, and I run a three month one to one series to support you in getting from where you are to where you want to be and help you reduce or eradicate the symptoms that you're experiencing.

The second is if you're a health professional, massage therapist, yoga teacher and you're wanting to integrate more therapeutic aspects of yoga into your practice I run an IAYT accredited yoga therapy program and it's an advanced training program.

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So it's really about up-leveling your skill, utilizing all the things around therapeutic modality including biomechanics and considerations for posture and helping you get great results with your clients. But not only that, helping you build a business that really honors you.

So, many of our trainees pay off their training fees within nine months of the program and they have full client bases, part-time or full-time client bases when they graduate. So they're well on their way when they graduate. And we have designed this program in such a way to support people to have that result because to me it's really important that people get a great return on their investment when they come and work with us.

So if that's something that is of interest, then do send us a note at health@functionalsynergy.com and me and my team would love, love, love to engage with you to find out if what we've got is a fit for you and you are a fit for us. So do reach out to us, health@functionalsynergy.com.

So with this let's begin by my happily laying on a table a statement which is as simple as this, that I don't love posture work for most people. And of course I've got the caveat of most. And I say that on purpose because there is a subset of people who are truly inspired to explore their posture as a way of learning to move better, and then in turn they feel better.

There's like a down regulating stimulus to their nervous system and so it's obviously showing that it's working, right? So that subset of people posture work obviously has a place.

I'm talking about all of the others, where posture work is really not a great idea and I want to explain three reasons why. The first is it puts a lot of shoulds into the mix. Like where your shoulders should be, and your head should be, and where your lumbar curve should be. It implies that there's something ideal, and that when they aren't in that ideal space then there's a lacking of function, strength, and power.

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And I simply know that this is just not true because changing the placement of a body part doesn't mean that you're changing anything functional, right? I can push someone's head back, I can move their chin back, I can move their shoulders back, I can pull their shoulder blades together.

And more often than not, when I see people doing that they're creating more stress and strain, grip and brace in their system and definitely not more ease. It's not as easy space to be in and it's more grippy and held. So that doesn't contribute much to reducing pain.

The second is that there tends to be this assumption that if the head is forward, or the shoulders are rounded, or something's up with the shoulder blades, or again, that lumbar curve, that that's the problem, right? It looks at, like the lumbar curve, for example, is really, really common of like, oh, look, that lumbar curve is overly lordotic so we better flatten it out.

Well, that's making an assumption that the lumbar curve is just waking up one day saying I'm going to be overly lordotic. When the reality is that the lumbar curve is becoming overly lordotic not because of the lumbar curve, but because it's responding to forces at play. So it's responding to other things that are going on in the system.

So to simply flatten that curve to make it look better, it's much like I said in point one, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's going to be better. It doesn't mean you're going to be absorbing or dissipating load or other forces any more effectively. So the chances for you to have to hold your breath or to brace or to grip really, really goes up. And that puts a ton of extra energy into your system that you've got to process through.

So that's very, very, very, very fatiguing. And people have actually over trained trying to get their posture back into a better place, and they lose out on the ability of cultivating ease. As a result, then they tend to have less experience with a parasympathetic down regulating experience of their nervous system, and tend to be more often in a state of fight or flight or a state of sympathetic drive.

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The other related piece to this is number three, which is when you're having to think a lot about your posture and where your body parts are in space, you are having to think a lot, right? There's a lot of cognitive bandwidth going into that process. And as a result, it means you're taking away other bandwidth from actually solving important creative problems.

So just kind of consider that and think about that. Noodle through that a little bit of like for what purpose is posture really shifting or needing to shift? And are you creating more ease as a result of it? Or are you creating more tension? And that's something to consider, because my preference really is to support people in the simplification of how they experience their body.

And I love working with the body as like the structure and its biomechanics, because it can inform us of so much. So I like to think about posture as an embodiment of our structure, where our structure is our physical body, bones, muscles, tissues, blood, lymph. And it's impacted and affected by our genetics, our life experiences like nutrition, illness, body use and abuse.

And then posture is this how we embody or how we live in our structure. It's the result of energy and attitudes moment to moment that shape our bodies. I often like to say as well, that whatever our posture is, is the safest and most secure place that we know to be.

There's layers of who we are that show up in our posture. And even if we think our posture should shift, the posture that we are currently embodying is that which is the safest place for us to be. It's not on a cognitive conscious level, this is on a subconscious level. And that's what's really important to understand.

I remember when my twin sister passed away and it was rather tragic, her passing. And it was about two weeks after that and I was running an in-service with my team of teachers who were working in a space that I ran. And I had a chiropractor teach us about posture and he brought me up and put me in front of the posture monitor thingy he had, it was a cool tool.

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Anyway, it was stunning to see my posture. I was so twisted up, which made sense given that her passing came fast, it was not expected. And it really pulled the earth from underneath me. And so it made sense that my posture was kind of twisted and contorted as I was processing through the grief.

A number of weeks later after that I did go for chiropractic adjustments to support myself and it turned out, and this is so fascinating, the adjustments didn't work and it was actually way too painful. Not painful to be adjusted, but when my body parts got into a different space I couldn't bear it. It was just the grief just came over me and waves and waves and waves and waves and it was so challenging to be in that position.

So I just didn't go back until I could process through more of the grief, until I could feel myself a little bit more settled out that I could probably explore what a different posture was. And what's interesting is, as I processed through the grief my posture started to change naturally, which I thought was also really interesting.

Another story is I had a trainee many, many cycles ago who was diagnosed with clinical depression. And if you think about a classic diagnosis of clinical depression, she embodied that position. So there was a rounded forward, a collapse in the chest, head sort of kind of hanging a little bit. And it was interesting to see her process over the course of the training because we weren't, as I've mentioned already, we weren't specifically addressing posture or wanting to change posture.

But there was one of the training weeks that she showed up for and I'm thinking, you look rather different. Where's the person that I know? And who are you? Like it was amazing to see. And what she had told me is that she was doing all this other work around yellow lights. And there's other episodes inside the podcast on yellow lights, but the notion is really listening to the body when it whispers so you don't have to hear the screams.

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And she started to recognize there was this moment on a precipice, which would normally be her cue that she was about to go down the rabbit hole of a depressive episode. And she had this experience of realizing that she didn't have to go down that hole. That maybe the signal of her being on the metaphorical precipice was actually an indicator of something else.

And she started to play around more with these concepts of self-care and she started to tune more into her body and the signals to the point where she was able to reconfigure how she was in her body. Not that she tried to change her posture, but as she was able to listen more clearly to the signals of her body, her body posture changed.

And it correlated with the shifting of her depressive symptoms to the point where she said, I'm not depressed anymore, I don't think. I don't think I'm clinically depressed anymore. I can tune into when I need more care and I can tune into what my signals are telling me, the messages of my signals, of my symptoms.

So it was interesting because when we saw her she was more upright, her head was taller, she was just more aligned. And yet specific posture work wasn't actually done. It was more the work that arose out of the awareness of what those signals were. So some might say, well, she did emotional work. And she obviously did, yes. But it was more about tuning into the signals of what her body was indicating to her and her listening to what those signals are.

So it really starts to become interesting to see what's really impacting the way that we embody our structure, the way that we choose unconsciously, subconsciously, of course, what the safest and most supportive place for us to be in any given moment. And if we don't fight that, and instead become curious about it, I think we begin to gain a much greater understanding of the relationship between our posture and our structure.

So when we look at an individual who has an overly lordotic curve, what's interesting here is, A, that it's a question that a lot of people will ask me

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when I have conversations like posture and pain conversations and where my views land on posture. And what they'll ask me is, so should we flatten that spine? Because obviously, that lumbar curve shouldn't be so big.

And my response is, well, why? Why not? What's wrong with a curve of the lumbar spine being overly lordotic? Who's to say that's not the best position for that person given all of the layers of who they are? The question becomes, is it functional in all the ways?

So initially when I'm seeing someone in a standing pose and I see that they've got that discrepancy or there is an overly lordotic curve, because that's often when yoga instructors will see this, is that that's what the client has and then they'll want to flatten or tuck their tail. And I'm just more interested in what that curve actually is.

So then as they move into high lunge or warrior one, or as they move into tree pose or chair pose, or as they move y with their legs towards warrior two, does that lumbar curve change at all? Or does it stay fixed? Because if it's changing, then that's interesting data. If it doesn't change or it becomes more fixed, that's also interesting data about its dynamic nature or lack thereof.

But what's also even more interesting is because I focus so much on how those leg bones are moving in the hip sockets, how those hip joints are actually moving, how the shoulder blades are actually moving, how the arm bones are actually moving in the shoulder sockets, like what's going on in terms of connection between the ribs and the pelvis? And I'm watching this as someone moves from the starting point, wherever they are, to the posture that they're embodying, right?

So I'm watching the whole trajectory of movement from point A to point B. And I'm watching the dynamic state between their legs, their pelvis, their ribs, their ribs and their pelvis, the spine, the shoulder blades, their head related to the ribs, like all their parts. I'm watching the dynamic relationship of their parts.

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And as I watch that and as they move better, interestingly enough, what we start to see when they come back to that original standing position, is if they've moved well, their lumbar curve has shifted. Not because I've asked them to flatten it though, but because the rest of their body has moved better. Their arm bones have moved better in their shoulders. Their leg bones have moved better in their pelvis.

They're more tuned in to the way their ribs and their pelvis interact. So then muscles that may have been holding tight or other tissue that's been holding tight gets an opportunity to loosen up a little bit, settle out a little bit, more connection, more stability.

So perhaps if someone's got an overly lordotic lumbar curve, maybe that's an expression of some other kind of dysfunction going on in their body that's not posture related per se, but is more about like a singular joint that's not functioning as well, or maybe two joints that aren't functioning as well. And when we've just simply helped those joints move better, then boom, all of a sudden the parts change orientation, right?

So I think what's really interesting is when we can start to see this relationship of our parts and see them as a truly dynamic nature, we can actually begin to see more clearly what needs to change, what's working, what's not working. As opposed to, oh, overly lordotic curve, let's flatten that spine. Oh, tailbone kind of sticking out like a duck tail, tuck that tail.

Well, for what reason? Maybe that pelvis is in the position because it is absolutely ideal for the daily activities a person is doing. Or maybe it's showing up because there's some tension being held somewhere in their ribcage, or how their arm bone is moving in the shoulder socket. Or maybe it's about their jaw gripping. But we won't know until we watch them move and until we become curious enough about how they move and teach that person about their movement so they too can become curious.

So if I'm going to summarize today with this posture conversation and give you some ideas to really noodle with, here's something that you can

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consider. Remember that posture is an expression. It's an embodiment of our structure. And it's the safest, most secure place that we know ourselves to be.

That it comes through many, many layers, like structure, emotion, breath, mental attitude, thought processes. All of those can impact the way that we experience ourselves in our posture. And when we can see the dynamic nature of the way posture is being expressed during our movement, then we can make some really interesting shifts to simply how our parts relate to each other.

If you want to explore this further, what I highly encourage you to do is to go over to my YouTube channel, I've got a ton of video there that goes through my way of sequencing, helping people really pay attention to how their leg bones move in their hip sockets, how their arm bones move in their shoulder sockets. So they can really tune into the way that their structure, structural pieces interact with each other.

And as you do that, the feedback I keep hearing from people is how much more in tune people are to that which is their structure, so I'll call it their skin sack. How much more in tune they are that they can just get that much more understanding to how these pieces relate.

And then that can then start to shift how you then are expressed through your structure, how your structure is embodied. And then as you go, you'll likely see a shift in your posture in a very easy level, enjoyable, integrative kind of way. Have fun exploring.

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.

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