

# Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Susi Hately**

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## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and 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. With this episode, I continue my mini-series on reducing and eradicating pain. This is a lead-up to my therapeutic yoga intensive that I'm hosting this April, which is a six-day, 36-hour program where you work with me from eight to 2:30 Mountain Time, Saturday, April 15th to Thursday, April 20th. It's designed for health professionals and yoga teachers who want to dig in and learn the concepts that work so well for me helping my clients reduce and eradicate pain more consistently and with sustainable results.

So if what you're hearing on this podcast makes a lot of sense and really resonates with you, I encourage you to read [learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive](http://learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive). It would be an honor and such a pleasure to teach you and to really have you experience the embodied process of what it is to reduce and eradicate pain.

So you'll be learning intellectually, and you'll also be learning with your own body. So lots of times there's a significant amount of pain that's reduced with the participants who are in the program because of what they're learning. So a really felt sense of the experience of what's possible, which then makes it that much easier to work with your clients because you know what is possible when you do the work. To read more about that, please visit [learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive](http://learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive).

So let's get into this week's episode, which is all about bracing patterns. Bracing patterns are such a key factor in a person's recovery process. A person can make so many gains related to their movement, but if their bracing patterns don't resolve or reduce significantly, I have found that their pain won't stay away or go away sustainably.

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

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

It's such an important piece that today I want to discuss more of how I view bracing patterns, also include some of my client's comments about their bracing patterns, and then how I help my clients resolve them. So first, let's dig into what I see as bracing patterns with my clientele who are coming in to see me who have pain or strain and they want to reduce or eradicate that pain or strain.

To me, bracing patterns are very creative compensatory strategies which are helping somebody hold themselves together. You know, much like the metaphorical duct tape, they are a solution, or a partial solution I should say, that's at least getting some part of the job done. I also call them gripping patterns or holding patterns because of the texture of what I'm seeing.

So the quality of the bracing pattern might be more of a grip or something that's being held. And that can be a significant nuance to bring up with someone as they start to recognize and uncover and start to unknot and untangle some of these patterns. I see these patterns oftentimes in the ribcage, the jaw, the feet, the hands, abdomen. I often see people holding their breath in a way that's very braced in order to help someone move.

Now, I've only included some of the body parts. We really can brace, grip or hold anywhere in our body in order to get a job done. The key here is that as someone continues to train the pattern, it becomes more and more ingrained. So then the body and the brain associate the grip or the brace or the held pattern with whatever movement it's associated with.

So as an example, I've worked with a lot of people who have a tendency to scrunch their faces when they do a movement, whether it's a hip movement or a twist, really many different kinds of movements. And they'll tell me that this is normal, this is just what they do. And so then I'll ask them to humor me and to have the move without that happening.

And then invariably, what we see is that their range of motion becomes smaller and they start to notice sensation elsewhere, like that their neck or

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

their jaw starts to release. Or something in their ribcage starts to shift in a positive way. Or even their pelvic floor releases or their plantar fascia on the foot settles down.

The key is that simply because they've relaxed through their face or their jaw doesn't mean it's just in the face and the jaw the change happens, but rather could be anywhere just given our whole myofascial system. So you see that we can change up a bracing or a gripping pattern, and then tension can decrease so many areas of our body, and it's why this is such a significant piece for the recovery process.

So many people see this as normal, and yet when you really think about it, we don't want to walk around in a braced way. Even clenching our face while we do a hip movement is such an excessive use of extra energy that can be utilized for something else, right?

And if we're just thinking about training or retraining ourselves to move about in life with less pain, think about being on a bike or out for a run or balancing or slipping on the ice. If you're in a braced way, you're almost in this resistive way. And when we're in a resistive way, we have fewer options to be able to shift and change.

We want to be adaptable. We want to have variability in our movement. And that adaptability, that variability, that's more responsive rather than resistive. We want to be able to grow our ability to be responsive. We want to reduce our ability to be resistive in this context. We want to have, as I mentioned, variability. Adaptability to our movement.

We want to be dynamic, we want to have more than one or two strategies to move about in life. Because if we only have those one or two strategies, then when we add more complexity of movement or there's a complexity of load that comes to us because that's sometimes what life provides us, the chance for injury happening goes way up.

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

This is why as part of the process of recovery, I want to help people to recognize and then retrain these patterns, to grow their ability to be responsive. So that's my view on bracing patterns, or sometimes called gripping and holding patterns.

How about my clients? How might they talk about their bracing patterns? Well, here's what I've heard over the past week, suck in your belly, pull in your ribs and do the thing. Clenching, holding on, working against gravity, and to prevent softening. Holding it all together for fear of letting go. Holding to prevent collapse to the floor. Gripping my thoughts because it helps me get through the next step. Holding my butt or my anal sphincter.

Those are all different ways that people describe how they hold themselves. Now were they able to describe this when they first came to see me? No, not at all. It also wasn't part of the discussion when they first came to see me. It was only after they were starting to be able to recognize movement patterns that they were able to then recognize the bracing pattern because so often that bracing pattern is under our level of awareness.

Now, other practitioners might go at and may have tried to help them get rid of the bracing patterns because, to someone with a trained eye, you can actually go after it. We see this in massage, in yoga, in PT. In massage, people will try and get into those held areas. PT, there's a great technique called IMS, which is also dry needling, which can be really effective at getting into areas of the body. In yoga, people can see that someone is braced and then try and do a movement to kind of release it.

But here's what I've noticed when people go directly at a bracing pattern, it's resistive. It doesn't want to let go. It's the duct tape. It is the place where our brains feel the most safe and secure. Yeah, it's not the most efficient pattern, but if it's the thing that's holding us together and then they're getting a stimulus to release it, then why on earth would it let go? It's just going to grip harder and harder and harder.

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

Which is why when the massage therapists who are really good, and the PTs who are super skillful with dry needling can do such magical work because they know exactly where to put their technique, their needle, or their hands. Because if they go after too many areas and they get rid of that duct tape, they're likely going to see their patient or client flare because sometimes it can be thought of, well, if I get rid of all these tension patterns, then those other muscles will start to kick in.

I have not seen that as a tendency to occur. What I've seen is that the bracing pattern lets go, the other muscles don't know how to kick in, and flare-up happens. There isn't structural support, which is why I don't go for the bracing pattern. It just never worked early on in my career, so I just didn't.

Instead, what I did, I was very deliberate, and I continue to be very, very, very deliberate. I let the duct tape remain there. Remember, metaphorically, I see bracing like duct tape. It's an effective enough solution to get the job done. It's solving some part or some aspect of the problem. It's doing a good enough job. Yeah, it's not what we ultimately want, but to tear that duct tape off, good Lord, how on earth would our brain say yeah, I want to let go?

Because remember, our brains are the ones that are interpreting our symptoms. So now there's a huge vulnerability that's not even huge if there's just a small vulnerability that's in the system, we're going to grip even harder, and then that's going to even be more difficult to let go of. Now our brains know what happens if we just let go of that or try to let go of it, or someone has tried to force the duct tape to let go.

So again, I don't go after the bracing pattern. I don't go after the duct tape. Rather what I do is I cultivate stability and support elsewhere so the duct tape can loosen naturally on its own. And I see this happen so beautifully for so many clients.

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

What happens is when I start to work with just improving movement patterns at the largest joints, right? The hips, the shoulders, help them notice their compensatory strategies, cultivate better and better movement. The bracing pattern can still stay, it's allowed to be there, the duct tape is doing a great job. And bit by bit the newer patterns are being retrained.

What the client will then say to me is they'll say, ooh, I feel taller. I feel lighter. I feel more centered on my feet. And when I show them this, and I say, hey, you did that to yourself. You're taller, you're lighter, you're more grounded on your feet. Now their brain not only heard me, but they heard themselves say that out loud, and that is evidence for the part of their brain that needs it. And now that starts to increase the safety feeling, the support feeling inside.

Now I go about continuing to hone and train the lightness, build upon the lightness, or the tallness, or the groundedness, or the centeredness, or whichever word the person is utilizing. And then as we continue to train that pattern, that lightness, that groundedness, that centeredness, lo and behold, the body starts to release more and the bracing pattern continues to let go quite naturally.

So, what often will tend to happen at some point in the recovery process, load will get too high. Whether it's because someone's like, oh, I feel so good, I want to go for my run, or oh, I feel so good, I want to go do this other opportunity. Or they just happen to just do too much, or they're sitting in front of their computer for too long or something like an accident happens or something happens. And then the bracing pattern might return, the person doesn't get concerned or scared, they now have the attitude of oh, I know why you're back, and I know exactly what I need to do to support you.

So they too don't view the bracing pattern as being bad. They see it as this amazing process that their body is utilizing to support them because, as I've mentioned already and on lots of different episodes, compensatory

## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

strategies are an extremely creative way to get a job done, and good on the person for being adaptable in that way.

Now, at some point, the reason why they're visiting with me is the adaptability is no longer working for them. But the clients already demonstrated that they are adaptable, we just get to refine and figure out how to use that adaptability in a way that really serves them now to get into that next level of function.

Now, the added benefit here that I want to add, and I don't want to go down the rabbit hole with this, but I think it's important because it's important in my mind in terms of what recovery, and healing, and true recuperation is. And that is when you're able to get to this place of recognizing what that bracing pattern is. Recognizing how to retrain the other pattern so lightness and ease starts to become more and more and more cultivated, as you begin to tap into a subtler and subtler nuance. A subtler whisper. A subtler yellow light.

There's an ease that begets ease. You're just more easeful. You're quieter because when you're in tension or strain that's incredibly energy-using or depleting I could call it. There's a lot of energy that's utilized when someone is in pain.

So as the neuromuscular patterns start to shift and you're able to tune in more quietly, you yourself become more quiet. You yourself tune into more subtleties and you're able to perceive things around you with just a greater clarity, right? There's just this overall sense of ease. And that becomes very, very cool.

So in summary, I like to think of bracing patterns not as something to release, but rather that they're holding together like duct tape. And the duct tape serves a purpose. I don't want to go in there and try to release them for a very, very good reason, because if I rip that duct tape off we can't assume that other muscles are going to then fire up because so often that's not what happens. Instead, a flare-up happens.

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



## Ep #162: Bracing Patterns - When to Reduce Them for Reducing and Eradicating Pain

We want to be able to support, we want to be able to nurture, we want to cultivate these better movement patterns so that quite naturally the result is the duct tape falls off. Not that it's the process of falling off, we don't want to rip it as the process. We want it to be the result of the process.

So I'm then providing more support through stability and mobilization in different areas of the body so that if the bracing pattern had a voice it would say, yep, I'm the glue holding you together. And now that these other parts are coming on board, I feel safe enough to let go. And I will.

So if all of that makes sense, if that resonates with you, and you want to join me for the therapeutic yoga intensive, then you can visit [learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive](http://learn.functionalsynergy.com/intensive). Looking forward to tuning in with you next time. Take good care.