

Ep #168: Answering Now What: Breast Cancer Recovery with Yoga, Breath and Stillness



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Susi Hately

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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. With this episode, I launch into a new mini-series on helping people to recover and recuperate from breast cancer and breast cancer treatment. I have a long, long, long history of working with people who are going through a cancer treatment process, as well as a recuperative process.

I provided a program to the University of Calgary, which they studied from 2001 to about 2009. And the program suggested some really interesting and great results for folks who were both going through treatment as well as coming out of treatment and into that recuperative process.

The key thing that I have learned over time with folks who have been diagnosed and those who are going through the treatment process, is the underpinning really to at all is answering the question "now what?" Because once diagnosed, there's an undeniable line in the sand that is drawn. What was before no longer is what is, and everything going forward is unmistakably different. The veil of life, the veil of illusion has been pulled away.

So really, the focus over my history of working with people who are going through treatment or who are post treatment and are in the real recovery process is that wherever someone is on the spectrum of recovery, they can reset the foundation from which to maintain, attain, or retain as active and as balanced a lifestyle as possible. Because no matter where on the spectrum of recovery they are, with as many decisions that have to be made, people still need to move.

So whether it is the small movements which may feel so challenging, like being able to turn your head in bed, to rolling out of bed, to walking to the bathroom, to sitting on the toilet, or the more complex movements

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necessary for day to day errands, which perhaps at this time can feel bloody exhausting. Tasks like grocery shopping, or making meals or picking up or dropping off the kids. The thing with each one of those, whether it's the simple ones, or the more complex ones is that movement is a necessary component of each one.

And while this is as much about movement, it's also not entirely about movement, or movement at all costs. But rather, it's about movement with as much ease and comfort as possible. In my almost 30 years of working with people and helping them to eradicate or reduce pain, the people who have moved in the context of comfort and ease, experience greater pain reduction.

They have a greater release of tightness or a greater dissipation of tension. And it happens faster than those who force or push or try to push through pain. The folks who focus in on ease and comfort, they build more resilience. They feel more resilient and more flexible. Their strength improves more quickly, and their stamina grows more consistently. And overall, they become more functional, quicker. And the obstacles which at one time felt more insurmountable, become less so.

So with this mini-series I'm going to cover off some of the really key points I have found that are so important and significant for someone to get back their movement, reconnect with themselves, and really tune in even more closely to the whispers of their body so that they can gain more strength, more stability, more mobility, more freedom, more ease. Have them start to recognize these relationships between what goes on through the shoulders and the hips, how the breath really can impact so much of how you move and how you feel.

I find a lot of people can develop this idea that because they've had surgery, that the scar tissue in and around the area where the surgery occurred will just innately be problematic. I hope that through this mini-series I can show you that that doesn't have to be the case.

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I've worked with countless people who have had all different forms of breast cancer surgery, from having full breast removal, to having a lumpectomy, to only having a biopsy done, to having breast reconstruction, a whole variety of scenarios. And in each scenario I was able to help them reduce the tension and strain and shift up the way that that scar tissue was feeling.

So I want you to know that change can be possible. Tissue can change, even when there's been a scar, even when there has been surgery, even when there has been radiation and the tissue has changed due to radiation, even if you've had chemotherapy. There's so much that can shift.

So what I'm hoping is through this mini-series, you can begin to see this for yourself, for your clients. And if you have a loved one who's going through this process, feel free to share it with them too. So much can change. So let's begin.

Let's return back to that question of now what? Where do I go from here? How do I gather up the pieces and return to some form of normal? How do I get back to ordinary? Or as one client said to me, "I've been fighting this for so long and now I am not needing to fight anymore. And I know I should be happy, but I'm not. So how do I reconnect with my body? How do I reconnect with that vital inner sense of self?"

There are many places where we can begin. We can begin with relaxation, with breathing, with yoga poses, modified movements. We can start with a meditation practice, yoga Nidra. There's so many layers, so many angles from which to start.

So then how do you choose? Where do you choose? And what needs to be considered to support the process of healing? Well, that's what I want to dig into over these next series of episodes to give you an overview of what I share with my clients when I see them for private sessions.

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So you'll be getting these insights from my almost 30 years of working with clients who are recovering from the cancer process, and very specifically through this mini-series the breast cancer treatment and recuperative process. The way that I see yoga is that it's multifaceted, its movement, its breathing, its stillness, and those are just the start.

So in that light, my focus is to initially help my client, help you, to improve their physical body. The way that I see yoga is that it's so multifaceted. I begin with this idea of movement, breath and stillness, but these are really just the start. So in that light, my focus is to help my client to improve how their physical body is moving. And what's interesting is as the movement starts to happen, it's not uncommon for emotional and thought patterns or feelings to arise.

Now, I'm not a psychologist, nor do I offer counseling to my clients. However, what I've seen throughout my career is this huge mirror of our body movement and what's going on mentally and emotionally and spiritually. There's such a clear connection between those two.

So for someone who tends to force a whole lot, there's often this forcing that tends to happen in other areas of their life as an example. So when I can help that person redirect that ambition, that force, that drive through their physical body movement, things begin to shift. Their mobility starts to shift. Their flexibility starts to shift. Their stability and their stamina become more consistent.

And it's also not uncommon, or I should say it's actually very common for a lot of these emotional and mental patterns to release or shift or integrate in some way. But again, I'm not talking about it, it's simply more what I'm noticing. And then I meet that movement pattern, I meet that person where they're at and then I enable and I teach them to better movement. Something that becomes much more true to them. Something that's honoring their tissue that enables a responsiveness and not this grippy or forced or bracing.

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This integrative way into the healing process can be so compassionate, so multi-layered, and so reconnecting after such an intense treatment process. A process that can really hammer away at one's internal knowing, one's intuition, one's gut feel, their kinesthetic sense.

So again, by simply watching someone move and then teaching them how to move better, and then letting them feel or I get to show them through Zoom how they're moving differently before and after, they then get to witness they can somatically experience how their body can change. And it's often with this change, with this witnessing of their own self shifting, their tissue changing, that they regain a new belief and a new connection with how their body is moving. And in turn, how they're moving about in the world.

I had a client recently, when she came to see me she was talking about how there is a real tension in and around where her left breast had been. And she was figuring that this was because of the scar tissue and the surgery and the radiation, that this is just the way it was. And I said to her, maybe it is the way it is. From everything that I have read and understood and all of the work that I've done over 30 years, it might be. But it also might not be. So let's just see how you move and let's play.

And this is a really, really common conversation that I have with my clients who are recovering from breast cancer surgery, because the one common thing amongst them all is there's been often some version of surgery, and there's been some version of either chemo or radiation or both.

And there's oftentimes some feeling of discomfort, of strain, of like there's just this thing back here that, ah. And meaning back here, I mean for some it's in behind the breast area, or it's in and around the ribcage, and it's like, oh, I can't get it unstuck is what often feels like. And then it's just they shrug their shoulders often and say, well, maybe this is just the way it is.

But then as we actually get them moving and tuning in, but really tuning in and feeling the relationships between how their ribcage and their shoulder

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are moving and their hips are moving, they start to see and notice that it changes and there's more freedom and more lightness. And this is what I mean here, is that when they can see or feel, they can see the actual change in their range but more importantly feel the shift in somatically what is being experienced inside. That's when their belief starts to change about what's possible.

And then no longer is it, okay, well, this is just what's happened as a result of surgery and treatment. It's, okay, so something happened was surgery and treatment, and my tissue is clearly demonstrating that something different can be experienced. And that shift of belief changes then how they're feeling about what's possible, which changes up the way that they approach the way they do their exercises because now they see a different future.

So it's key here is it's about not only the movement that I'm offering them, but also how they're doing it. How they're tuning into it, right? It's not just this to-do list of getting something going in better range, or rolling a ball, or breathing. I mean, all of those things are there, but it's how we're doing it and how we're tuning in. And is this appropriate for you at this time?

When you can bring these components together, you can vastly, vastly improve the speed and efficiency of healing, right? So often people can overdo or they can under do. Either they're in a rush, or they can feel scared and not move at all. But when we can tune in and reconnect in a meaningful way that honors your tissue and your own inner knowing, really, I mean, from what I've seen so much really anything if I could put it that way, or so much as possible.

And I share this because so often that we hear that healing takes time. And yet when you understand the way the body moves, when you understand this idea of a relationship between how you're moving and mental, emotional and spiritual states, when you can see that the body in many ways as a barometer of the mind, the process can really pick up a

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momentum at a remarkable tempo. Remarkable tempo. And yet the tempo is organic, integrated and long lasting.

So I'm not trying to push anyone to make their healing process faster. But what I will say is that when we give our bodies the stimulus that they need, it's really amazing what happens. So it's not trying to force something down the throat, so to speak, but rather really tuning into what does the system need? What does the body need? What does the mind need? Because as we know it's all integrated.

So with that, let's get into the first key concept. And it's the impact of load. Now, what do I mean by load? Well, our ability to stand, sit, move around, get down to or up from the floor, requires us to be able to shift or transfer forces in our body.

So if you think about it, when I'm simply standing or you're standing, we have the weight of ourselves and gravity moving towards the ground. We also have ground reaction force coming up from the earth. So if we're taking this structure of our body and we are unable to absorb and dissipate load, if we don't have the necessary infrastructure or physical integrity, as we move about we will compensate.

We'll also experience, quite likely, more strain, aches, pains or tiredness. And yet as we improve our infrastructure, our physical integrity, we'll stand more perpendicular to the earth and sky. And we'll be better able to dissipate and absorb load both in the standing position as well as moving from standing to sitting and back to standing again, walking, running, climbing stairs.

Now let's add another layer to this. So we're going to come back to standing here. So we were standing, we had the weight of our body, gravity moving down to the floor and ground reaction force coming back up. So if I move from standing on two feet to being on one foot, now I have more weight, more load moving through one leg. I have a smaller base of support.

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So now imagine walking. I have to be able to shift that load from one leg to the other leg. So as I continue to walk, I have to have stamina not only in my cardiovascular system, but also in how my muscles and connective tissue are able to stabilize me as I transfer and dissipate the load from one leg to the other leg, from lower body to upper body, upper body to lower body.

Okay, now, let's add a bit more complexity to this and add running to the picture. Very similar to walking, but now there's more load, right? And what I mean by this is if I were to stand on a scale, it would read a certain number. If I move around on the scale, that load is changing and that number goes up. And if I jump, there's more force, so the number goes up again because the load has gone up.

This is the same as when I compare standing, walking and running. Each provides more load, greater force. So as such, if we want to move with less strain or less pain into walking and to running, we need to have the necessary structural integrity to do so. This is not difficult to do.

If you've been following this podcast for any length of time, you know that I am one who teaches about improving movement patterns, of quieting compensatory strategies to have the ultimate goal of supporting someone who is recovering to be able to stand easily. To walk, to fully engage in life, to be able to absorb and dissipate load.

Time and time again, I consistently see that as people are better able to absorb and dissipate physical load, they're also better able to absorb and dissipate load in the rest of their life. And as load increases in the rest of their life, they naturally have skills and tools to which to mitigate, manage, and make better choices.

So I'm making this comment here because even though we're talking movement, it's all interweaved, it's all interrelated, the inner and the outer. Which then brings me to another important concept around load and this idea of strength.

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There's a difference, in my mind, between strength and the ability to absorb and dissipate load. Strength can come in all shapes and sizes, meaning in order to produce force people can brace and get rigid, hold their breath, or use some other compensatory strategy in order to move whatever thing they're trying to move.

And yet using those strategies creates inefficiencies in movement and overall weakness, because the body parts that are doing the work aren't meant to and the body parts that are meant to be doing the work aren't. So there's a lot of inefficiency, which leads to a lot more fatigue, fatiguing faster, which can lead to further compensation, right? So you can kind of see there's this energy drain here, more taxing on the body, which can really interrupt or even disrupt the process of healing and recovery.

I've seen this also with flexibility, same idea. Post surgery treatment, so a lot of people will feel really, really tight in through the front of their chest. And in order to be able to do a zipper up to the back, or to put on a bra, or to kind of scratch in behind their back. Or to bring their arm over their head when they want to do their hair, or wash their hair, or hair dry their hair, putting a plate up into a cupboard further above. Sometimes there's this idea that there's an issue with the range of motion, so they'll want to stretch to make something happen.

Now for the example I'm going to give here, I'm actually going to move down to the pelvis because this is a really, really clear example. Let's say someone wants to do a really simple hamstring stretch. They're lying on their back, they bring their leg to their belly, and maybe their pelvis lifts slightly off the floor and they probably think it's not really a big deal.

When their pelvis lifts, what's important to note is they're no longer moving at their hip, like their leg bone in the hip socket. Instead, they're moving their pelvis, spine and torso. So they might think that they're connecting to the hamstring or the back line of their leg because there might be a sensation still of the hamstring. Like they can feel something's happening

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back there. But in fact, they're doing more work in their back than they're doing at their hamstring.

If they can keep their pelvis quiet and move their leg bone with their pelvis quiet, now they're anchoring that area where the hamstring attaches. So oftentimes, when we keep the pelvis quiet, even though we don't go perceivably as far, we actually gain better suppleness, mobility or flexibility, rather than the tightness or tension which can arise when you actually move your pelvis.

So the idea here is if you move your joint the way that it's designed to move, you'll actually get better results than going for a stretch sensation and moving a body part that isn't involved. So move the pelvis when you're attempting to do a hamstring stretch, you're going to get more work likely done around the back of your pelvis, through your back or up into the ribcage.

Whereas if you allow that pelvis to stay quiet, and just move that leg bone and really focus in on that hamstring, you're likely to get a greater opportunity for more suppleness in through the back of the leg.

Tied into this concept is a term that I've used a lot on this podcast and I teach it all of the time in my classes, which is the yellow lights. If you think of a light standard there are red, yellow, and green lights. The red lights tell us to stop. The yellows indicate the red is coming. And green is a go. And when we are recovering, there are initially many, many red lights and very few green lights.

So the aim is to learn to move so the red lights lesson and the green lights grow. And the way to do this is to become more aware of your yellow lights. The yellow lights are the subtler indicators. They're the quieter whispers that indicate when we have almost had enough. Their expression, if I could put it this way, is unique to each of us and only we can recognize them for what they are.

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And so because they're unique to each person learning about them is often a process of trial and error. Someone might feel a sensation in their back, maybe when they're doing their hamstring stretch, as well. And they might not think it's a big deal until the next morning there's a soreness in an all of a sudden sort of way. Or there might be jaw tension or shoulder tension, because it really isn't that painful enough to stop. And then they keep going, but then the red light shows up.

So the key here is to bring awareness to proper movement patterns and compensatory patterns as a way to bring up and bring attention to what these yellow lights are so we can tune into the quieter notion and the whisper of the yellow light. So then we can really tune down or tone down the reds.

Compensations then, are a form of a yellow light. When the person can recognize they're lifting their pelvis, as I mentioned in that hamstring stretch outlined earlier, they are recognizing the inefficiency of their movement patterns and are able to make the shift. Interestingly, they may also notice any mental or emotional patterns associated with this physical sensation, which can really round out the fullness of the whispers.

As an example of this, I remember a client of mine who was doing a movement and she paused part way through her range, but then kept going. When she came out of the movement I asked her how she felt. She goes, "Oh God, that was awful."

And I said, "Well, what happened when you were at that pause and then you kept going?" And she said, "Well, when I was at that pause it didn't really feel like I was doing enough, so I wanted to keep going." And then I asked them what happened after you kept going? She goes, "That's when the pain came." I'm like, aha.

So the thought pattern, I should be doing more or I'm not doing enough, that might be a yellow light. Well, then she started to notice this in other aspects of her practice. When she paused and had this thought and she

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was about to go further, that was her stopping point. That was her yellow light.

So you see here that it becomes an inquisitive process, one where there's a curiosity of what the body is saying. And as awareness grows, a person is really able to recognize when a yellow is fresh or stale. This is a powerful process for so many reasons.

If we go back to the original question that I led this podcast with, which was many people are asking the question now what? Where do I go from here? How do I regain? How do I pick up the pieces and carry on? In behind those questions is often another statement or series of questions or another ongoing conversation that's being had up in the thoughts, and it's a real spectrum.

I have heard my clients say to me, what's behind this "what next" question really is, how can my body do this? Why couldn't my body have told me? It feels like my body has betrayed me. By being able to connect into the yellow lights and tuning into the whispers, this idea of paying attention to how their body is moving, responding and communicating. For these clients, an amazing new level of trust can be regained. A new relationship formed.

I have other clients who are on the other end of the spectrum, in behind that question of "now what," how do I pick up the pieces and carry on? In behind that is an immense amount of gratitude for how their body has been able to get through treatment. And by becoming aware of how their body is moving and responding, they're able to further nurture it and progress forward.

Now there is a whole vast array of ideas in between those two spectrums. The impact of trauma can have all sorts of different responses and experiences. But what's so interesting for all the people that I've worked with, bringing it back to this common idea of tuning into movement, into breath, responding and recognizing how the body is moving and shifting

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and changing. How tissue is changing, and how that's changing belief, it's really, really powerful.

This will lead me into next week's concept, where we're going to get into some of the key ideas that I use to work with my clients from a movement perspective, looking at the biomechanics of what's occurring for people following breast cancer and some key considerations that you can use for your own recovery, or if you're working with clients, what you can pay attention to with your own clients. So stay tuned. I'm looking forward to seeing you back here. Thanks for spending some time today.

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.