

Ep #190: Neck Mini Series: Making “Neck Stretches” Work Better For You



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 enter into episode two of my neck mini-series. I ran my first neck mini-series back in episodes 135 to 139. And I'm running a second mini-series because I'm in the lead-up to my *Power of Pure Movement: Unwinding and Unraveling the Neck* that I'm running in September. And this is giving you a taste and an experience of what will be in that programming.

So if this resonates with you, you might find that a great opportunity for you to explore your own neck and have me teach you for six hours. This mini-series is covering four topics, the first and last episode being more on theory and these middle two being more on practice.

I'll be covering topics of alignment, how to make common neck movements or stretches work better, your neck to rib cage to pelvis connection, and then bringing it all together. This is designed for both people who have a persistency of issue in their neck, as well as the professionals who work with them and who want more integrative approaches to helping their clients.

What I did in preparation for this episode is I thought about the common neck stretches that I know, the common neck stretches that clients bring to me and then I did a little bit of Google searching on what is commonly out there called neck stretches. Now, truthfully, I don't love the word stretch for a bunch of reasons. I prefer to use them as movements.

One of the key reasons I don't love the word stretch is because it often leads people to facilitate a stretch. Like they go for that stretch sensation, which can lead to becoming a problem for people when they're going for the stretch sensation because when they're going for the stretch sensation they tend not to pay attention to how they're moving. They focus more on

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the subjective experience of stretch as being their guide about whether they're doing that movement correctly or not. And that might not be the best guide.

So this is one reason I'm doing this particular episode, to provide you other ways of noticing if the movement or the stretch is working for you. Things to consider and pay attention to, particularly if you're someone with persistency of issue because with persistency of issue comes other compensatory strategies. Often under a level of awareness and often need to be at least addressed, perhaps resolved, in order for the neck pain to really settle out.

So today I want to go through a couple of neck movements just to highlight these ideas and share other ways that you might not have considered, or you have considered, but at least to take you through a practice that you can explore.

Overall, the most common theme with the top neck stretches that I found on the internet, the common theme was having the hand involved. So whether it was bringing the chin towards the chest or bringing the ear toward the shoulder, what was commonly taught was then bring your hand onto your head and pull a little bit more. Whether it's pulling the chin a little bit more towards the chest, or pulling the ear a little bit more toward the shoulder.

The idea behind this was when most people are in their write ups or when they're talking on the videos is to create a deeper stretch. So it harkens back to what I was just saying a moment ago around utilizing stretch as the sensation of guidance that you're doing something great for you. The reality is, that stretch is more of a sensation. It's actually not the greatest indicator that you're doing something good or bad for yourself. It's just not a great indicator, period.

And the reason for that, in my mind, is because we can compensate our way in all sorts of ways with compensation patterns into neck movements

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and into stretches generally. And we can really mess things up in our body. So that’s why I tend to guide people into how they are actually moving their body and take out the hand.

This way you can really tune into okay, what is my actual range of motion? Where am I compensating? Am I actually moving in the plane that I’m meant to be moving? Or am I doing some funny business just to create a stretch? And is the stretch actually, is that sensation actually blinding me to something else that’s going on?

There’s also a number of chiropractors out there who will say too that getting the arm or the hand involved in the stretch can really mess up your spine. So that’s just another professional’s view on it. Not saying that it’s terrible, just make sure that you’re tuning into what you need to tune into and watch that you don’t get seduced by the stretch. It can really be a siren song, and we know about the stories of the sirens, it can really be quite a nasty ending.

So when you’re coming into movements like taking your chin to your chest or bringing your ear towards your shoulder, let’s actually see what’s going on, okay? So that’s where we’ll start to begin with.

Now, before we get into the movement, let’s just set ourselves up in prep. So you can be sitting down on a chair. I’m not a huge fan of starting you on the floor, but if that’s where you are that’s where you are. And the reason why I’m not a huge fan of it is oftentimes people, their spine tends to be in a rounded position or they might be tilted a little bit too far forward through their spine or their pelvis and just putting themselves into a position that is creating an inherent amount of tension already.

So think of being in a sitting position in a chair that supports you or even in standing. Just notice that you are somewhat balanced, either on your feet or sitting in the chair. And then before you get moving, tune into your breath and just overall what it is that you’re feeling inside.

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How is the inhale and exhale? How is that moving inside of you? And overall, how are you feeling? And what’s driving you to do these movements today? And that’s a really great question to ask yourself when you’re getting into any movement practice. What’s really driving you?

When you can tune into what’s driving you, you’ll start to see how the movement comes about because often what’s driving you is what’s going to drive you in the movement. So if you’re wanting to get the job done, you’ll probably get into the movie with the quality of let’s get the job done. If you are, hmm, I’m kind of curious about what’s going to happen today, then, hmm, I’m kind of curious what will happen today is present in the movement. Do you see where I’m going here?

So if we can just specifically recognize how we are doing. If you’ve been in a rush or if you’re feeling kind of heavy, those qualities will be present. And not to say that you can’t have them being present while you’re doing the movements. Because oftentimes moving when we’re feeling that weight can be helpful. It’s just to notice what is present and how that may or may not impact you.

Then from here, let’s start by just taking the chin towards the chest. No hands, just take your chin towards your chest. All right, now notice as you’re moving your chin towards the chest, what else is happening?

Now some of the things I’m going to suggest might sound sort of funny, but this is what I’ve seen in my practice, which is are your toes clenching right now as you bring your chin towards your chest? Are you gripping through your pelvic floor? Do your knees come together or apart? Does your pelvis also move? Do you shift your weight left or right as you bring your chin down towards your chest? Anything else going on in terms of tension or gripping or change of position?

And then move again, and can you move in a range where, let’s say, your toes don’t grip or the knees don’t fall in towards or away from each other. Or only as far as that pelvis doesn’t go into a tilt or a tuck or any other thing

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that is showing up as you do the movement. Find the range where that's not happening.

Same thing for pain or strain, can you have a range that doesn't increase pain or strain? And then do that a couple of times and notice what's happening. You can also add in breathing. When you're moving, are you actually breathing? Or do you hold your breath as you bring the chin towards your chest and then lift it back up again?

So again, just be aware. This movement called bringing your chin to your chest, what else is going on in your body? What else is increasing or decreasing in your body as you do it?

And then stop the movement series and just take a pause and now notice what is now present after doing the neck movement? Sometimes, and I don't want to put words into your experience, sometimes there might be pain that's increased.

Sometimes there might be lightness. Sometimes there might be groundedness. Sometimes there might be freedom. Sometimes there might be something different, but I can't name it. Just notice that there is a qualitative change in what you're feeling through anywhere in your body, including your neck.

All right, now let's bring your ear towards your shoulder. So we'll take the right ear towards the right shoulder. And then bringing that back up and then bringing the left ear to the left shoulder. All right, so now let's take a peek at what's happening here.

As you're bringing your right ear to your right shoulder, is your left shoulder coming with you? So are you slightly leaning over to your right as you bring your head to the right? And then without holding that left shoulder down, that might create more tension in and around the shoulder, the armpit, into the ribcage, can you simply take your right ear to your right shoulder only as far as that left shoulder doesn't rise?

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And then bring that back up. And then over to the other side, same thing. As you bring your left ear towards your left shoulder, do you use side bend or does that right shoulder lift? Do you bring more weight over onto your left hip? Good, and then come back up.

Okay, take a moment, notice if anything is new or different. Let's take the chin towards the chest again. And now notice what's happening in your face or your eyes. And as you bring your chin to your chest, is there any increase of tension or strain in your eyes or your face? Same thing as you bring your right ear to your right shoulder, left ear to your left shoulder.

And can you move in a range that doesn't increase that tension? Now, what might happen as you do this, and this was a comment that someone made in a recent training that I was running. She said, it's interesting that my actual range of motion is way bigger than my tension-free range of motion.

So she was noticing a bunch of tension and also pain. And as she moved in a range without that pain and without that tension, her range was a lot smaller than what her actual range is, which makes sense. And so my goal is to help you move towards that actual range and without that tension or pain being present.

And some people think, well, how does that happen? By moving in the range that doesn't have the pain or the tension increase. If you move into the actual range but pain and tension are present, then that is what is considered normal for your system. And that is what will continue to be given.

Whatever we give our nervous system, our nervous system gives back in kind. So if you want to have a different result, then in the context of this particular episode and these particular exercises that I'm sharing, move in the range where the tension doesn't increase. Now you're giving a different signal back to your system.

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Yes, the range will be smaller. And as you practice and then as you do other things in better movement and with less pain and getting the signals back to your system that are different or new, you will find that you will get greater and greater range with less tension and pain.

Sometimes this can be difficult to wrap one’s head around. It’s one of probably the most common questions I receive. Particularly from yoga practitioners, because they realize that their range is not as big as they thought it was and they’re like, but wait a second, but how do I increase my range? How do I get more flexible?

And it’s the same thing as I just mentioned, by moving in the range where that tension isn’t present because what you’ll end up doing is moving your body much, much better and you’ll notice that you’re compensating less. And in doing that, the signals that are now being sent to your tissue are different. And through that difference, change happens. If you don’t believe me, just give it a go. You might surprise yourself with what happens.

So again, the idea here was to take these exercises and to think about utilizing first without using your hand to not get seduced by the stretch, but instead actually notice what your body part is doing. What your head and your neck are doing, and what else is going on in your body and how it’s responding. So where is that compensation pattern?

And even if you think, well, gripping my toes isn’t really a big deal. You’re right, it’s not. But what if you were to try it out and then see what happens? And try it out a few times and see what happens over the course of practice. It may in fact, be the difference maker. And it may also reveal another difference maker in your system that can be supportive in moving you in the direction that you want to go.

If this has resonated with you and you would like my support over six hours in September, that is when I’m running Power of Pure Movement: Unwinding and Unraveling Your Neck. You can read all about it and register at learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck.

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It would be an honor and a pleasure. I would love, love, love, love, love, love to teach you over those six hours more and more ways to uncover and explore compensatory patterns that may be contributing to your neck and how your neck might be a compensation for what’s going on elsewhere in your body. Again, that’s learn.functionalsynergy.com/neck. See you next time.