

Ep #194: Reducing the Hump of Scoliosis with Pure Movement with Beth Kaplan



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.

Susi: Welcome and welcome back. I am so delighted that you are here today because, as you know, this podcast is all about me teaching you about helping people to reduce and eradicate physical pain, whether you are a client or whether you are a health professional.

And I love these types of episodes because it's one thing for me to tell you all the things that I think work really well, it's a whole other game when you hear it from someone who has actually been through it. Hearing in their own language, hearing their own experience and ultimately what they would like you to know.

There's so many ways of helping people and yourself to reduce and eradicate physical pain. So many ways, and they all work. And so if what you hear resonates, then take the insight into your own practice or when you're out for a walk or explore it in your experience. And allow it to, if I could put it this way, allow it to infuse into whatever it is that you're doing, whether you are the professional or whether you are somebody who has physical pain.

The reality is that there are ways out of physical pain, certainly reducing it. And with my guest today I'm really looking forward to hopefully opening kind of the aperture of what's possible. So with that, let me introduce you to Beth Kaplan.

Beth is one of my certification trainees. She has also been a private client. So it's one of those classic roles of someone who is a professional and has also had physical pain. And the piece that is very interesting about this story is that Beth also has scoliosis.

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And I've mentioned a few times through these episodes, and certainly through my career, that I do not focus on scoliosis as a perspective of changing the curve. That's not my way. There are people whose way is that and, again, they work. That's not my way.

And we're going to kind of go through what has occurred for Beth. And Beth will let you know this, but we were talking a bit about this before we started recording. But I don't believe Beth came to see me for the private sessions because of the scoliosis. She came to see me because of physical pain.

But what has transpired out of that has been very fascinating for the two of us. So with that, and without further ado, Beth, welcome. I'm so glad that you're here.

Beth: Thank you so much, Susi, I'm so glad to be here.

Susi: Yeah, really cool. So why don't we just get right into it? Why don't you share a little bit of background about the pain that you were experiencing, what brought you to the private series and anything else you want to add. And from there, we'll just kind of go from there with questions.

Beth: Perfect. So here's the kind of big back story, and I'll keep it somewhat brief. But looking back, I'm 61 years old. Looking back on my life I've always had some kind of back pain. And it's moved around in my neck, in my low back, in my mid back. I remember being a little kid and my family lived in Europe for a year and we would be traveling around, and I would stop and lean over and hang like in a forward bend.

I was like nine years old. And my parents asked me why I did that. And I didn't think there was anything odd about it, I would just do that because I had back pain. And I had kind of completely forgotten all about that until the past year or so when I've really been kind of drilling down into where does my pain come from? Why does it change? Why does it move around? Just sort of what's the deal with it?

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So when I was in my 40s I started to have really, really severe debilitating pain right around the SI joint on one side. It was so bad that I was unable to walk sometimes. I would get stuck. I'd be like, I feel good today, I'm going to walk to the bus stop to go to work and then halfway there realize, uh-oh, I can't.

So I started to practice yoga and eventually that seemed to help. And eventually, eventually it got better. And so that was the worst pain I've ever had, that low back pain. Along with that there was this kind of mid back pain that was like I thought of as a sort of secondary pain that would kind of be triggered by the low back pain.

But my big concern was that low back pain because that was what was hampering my life, like making my job really difficult and making everything really difficult. So when that low back pain got better, I sort of thought, okay, I'm out of pain. After a while I began teaching yoga and that was a whole journey of its own, it is a whole journey of its own.

I started to get increasingly interested in working with people who have pain, especially pain that may not show up on scans. Or maybe it shows up in the images, but not as dramatically as the pain that they're experiencing would indicate. And that was certainly my experience. There was spinal stenosis and a little bit of this, a little bit of that, but nothing that seemed to really solidly explain the pain.

So, kind of fast forwarding quite a bit, it was wonderful for years when that low back pain kind of faded. And then much more recently, I would say in the past year, I started to realize that the mid back pain, also on the left side, was worsening or at least becoming intolerable. I didn't consider myself pain free. I didn't want to live with that pain, which was every day, kind of coming and going every day.

Throughout all that time, of course, I'd been to many very good healthcare practitioners, really good PTs. I had surgery, which didn't work. I'd had

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injections, I'd had acupuncture, I'd had all kinds of things. Done a lot of strengthening work.

So in this past year, I guess I would say about a year and a half, I felt like I really wanted to get stronger. And I felt like if I could get stronger, that would help support my spine, help me move better, maybe that would help with the pain. And I did get stronger. I started working with a personal trainer. I got a lot stronger, but the pain got worse.

And the pain was kind of manifesting in this, what Susi and I have been calling the hump. Which is a little, about the size of my fist, kind of convex kind of hump on the left side around T8. And I could feel it with my hand. I could feel it come and go. I could feel it get softer or harder.

So here I was kind of feeling like I want to get stronger, but I can't get stronger without increasing my pain. Here I am embarking on this major kind of big commitment, this certification program to help me learn how to work with people in pain, but I have my own pain that I guess I had been thinking of as this kind of secondary thing, that that's just kind of how life is going to be.

And being in Susi's cert program is a deep dive. And so toward, I think at the end of the first training I just thought, I've got to see if this works on me. And Susi has her phrase of having to eat your own cooking, which just kind of kept resonating with me.

And I thought, well, if this works, then maybe it will work on me and maybe I'll put myself in the position of the client or the student and really experience what that's like. Kind of not really knowing, really not knowing if it would work. Hoping it would work, but not knowing how it would work.

And I remember at our first session I explained about the scoliosis, and I explained about the hump. And I really wanted, Susi, I wanted you to help me understand what muscle or muscle group it was that was in that clenched state. Because I have been thinking all this time, if I could figure

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out exactly what that was and what its purpose is, then maybe I could know my way into understanding it and helping it not do that.

So I was kind of shocked when Susi said, no, I can look at it, but I can't see what the muscle is. I can't know that from looking. And I was really surprised because I had been thinking about here we are, we're learning all this anatomy and how things function. Shouldn't I learn more and know more about what this muscle is supposed to be doing, and then kind of discipline it into working better?

And I noticed also that I think that I talked about scoliosis, and I explained about like three degrees of this and five degrees of that, and all of that. And then we didn't talk about it anymore. And sort of at times I would feel like, but let's remember I have this scoliosis. Let's bear that in mind. And it kind of didn't come up again and I was kind of waiting for it to come up. But it didn't.

And so the work that we did together was a real leap of faith. For me the slowing down, the dialing it back which it entails was not a huge deal, I thought at first, because I'm all about the slow yoga and the subtle yoga. And I'm all about awareness. And I get the idea that awareness is kind of like the root of change, if change is what you desire.

And so that's sort of the kind of central principle around the classes that I teach. But I began to see as we worked together that even if you slow it down, even if you kind of dial back the range of movement, you make the movements smaller, you can still be kind of powering through with brute force even if you're moving slowly in a small range of motion.

And that was a real revelation for me. I discovered that that's what I'm doing. And that was sort of like the first inkling of some kind of real self-knowledge that there's stuff going on here that I'm completely unaware of.

Susi: So then what happened? Because I remember when I was looking at you in one of our – So we were on Zoom. This whole series that we did

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together has been on Zoom. And I remember looking at you from one side and looking at you from another side, and you'd already made comments about how I'm feeling the hump differently. And I remember looking at it and I'm like, which side was it on again?

Because you'd be going one direction and then you were going the other direction and your back looked exactly the same. So there was something that was changing in the tissue. The orientation and the coordination through your torso was shifting and you are starting to gain a real understanding that your powering through had an impact on how the hump felt. Do you remember what you said about that?

Beth: No, what did I say?

Susi: Yeah, you were saying how you can now feel tension building in that area. And you started to feel that when you were powering through, that there was something kind of, and I'm not sure if you use the word grip or if you use the word tightness, or there was something like humpy. I think you started to use the word it's kind of humpy.

And then you were able to kind of recognize the gradient of when you weren't powering through, when you were powering through, and then the various sort of iterations between those, and then the corresponding sensations that were there, right?

Because a lot of people I find, more and more, I'm starting to kind of be able to articulate this better, is that there can be these switches. It's either there is pain or there's not pain. Or if there is pain, there can be a resignation to said pain. And so it can kind of be numbed out, which is sort of a version of not pain. But it's still there, it's just that you're numbing it out, right?

And really what started to happen for you is there became this gradient of color, like my typical of red, yellow, and green, but also the variations of when you mix those colors together. You started to recognize what for so

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many people can be surface noise, you could see the notes. You heard it as a melody, as opposed to just clanging, right, as just surface noise.

And not only did you notice it as a melody, maybe there was more than one melody, but you started to get into more of the notes and you started to feel some of the space between the notes. Like the language of your body started to come into light.

Beth: Yeah, for me it felt like I had just installed a dimmer switch instead of the on/off. Like a really, really subtle, really expensive dimmer switch with lots of range. And so I started to be able to feel not just pain or fine, but I started to feel those whispers of the yellow lights that you talk about, which I had not expected at all. And I didn't quite get the hang of why that was important or how it was important.

But suddenly, and this is after some months, I could feel a little bit of clenching, which I think would be kind of my clenching/gripping in that area. And then it would quiet down. And then other times it would start to clench, and it would keep going and clench and hurt for a while, and then it would go away.

So I started to realize that it truly could change in a much more subtle way. And I think we did some screenshots and I saw that it could change in terms of what it looked like. Which really surprised me.

Susi: Why? Why did it surprise you?

Beth: Well, so here's a little side story. I used to, not quite as much anymore, but I used to sew a lot. I sewed a lot of my own clothes. I kind of liked designing clothes. When you sew for yourself, you need really precise measurements. So somebody measures you, like everything. Like length from elbow to wrist, left and right, all the circumferences from your armpits all the way down through your hips. And then measuring the left side and the right side.

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So the measurements that I've always worked with, there's always this bigger measurement on the left side of the mid back. So I had this data that this side is convex, that's how it is. And when I've made garments and tried them on and then tinkered with them and adjusted the fitting, it's always been around that area, adjusting around that area because that's the reality of how my body is.

That and having the diagnosis of scoliosis, also kind of an objective fact, so I kind of knew things on the different sides are going to work to kind of hold things together. If the spine is curving off to one side, something is going to pull harder on the other side so that you don't list off to the right or something.

So those seemed like kind of cold, hard facts. How do you get around that? That's just reality. And I think I did start to let go of the idea of the diagnosis being the reality and of the structure dictating the function. So when we dialed back some of the movements to the extent that I could do them without the hump starting to engage, I could feel other muscles that I hadn't been able to access coming online.

And that was profoundly affecting because that meant that something could change. Even though most likely the curvature of my spine wasn't changing, the sort of basic physics of things wasn't changing, but something was changing.

Susi: Which is curious, isn't it?

Beth: Yes.

Susie: Because there's a lot of people who I have had conversations with that hear about an anatomical change in their body, and there's an assumption that that anatomical change is completely related to why they feel pain. And we can support them in their movement patterns, and I have no idea if that anatomy is changing or not. In some cases, people have gone back for a scan and the anatomy hasn't changed.

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But what we do know is that their pain has gone down dramatically, or it has gone away. So it's a great example of how, like you said it so well, like these were the cold, hard facts. These are the numbers related to what my spine is doing. This is a reality.

And the truth is it is a reality. It is a reality. And to start to see and experience that there is another reality, was it inspiring? Was it a bit of an F-bombing kind of brain fart moment? Was it possibility inducing? Like where was your emotional state when it was starting to be like when another reality was also equally as valid? What started to happen for you inside?

Beth: That was just profound. Really profound. It just opened up all kinds of doors. I had so many assumptions about what I could do and what my life would be like, kind of based on this limitation.

One thing we had talked about was that when I first kind of fell in love with yoga, I just loved the prana flow style, Shiva Rea's teachings. And that was what my trainings were as a yoga teacher, Shiva, and her students. And it's a very strong, very fluid practice. Very sweaty. And I just loved it.

And I had pretty much kind of decided I'm just not going to be able to do that anymore because, as I had discovered, when I started trying to get stronger the pain just got worse. So I had sort of decided I was going to back off. I mean, I had backed off from any kind of practice like that.

And I remember we had a conversation. I don't know what it was, you were asking about my yoga practice, my own practice. And I remember I shared that that was what I had really loved, initially, but that I didn't do that anymore. And I think you kind of raised the possibility that I could do that. That was possible.

And that was just something I just had not entertained that possibility at all. I mean, really, what I thought was that getting out of pain would be about learning new tricks to help it feel better. Like if you could lie over this prop,

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maybe you could get it to relax for a bit, or use a ball, or do some special stretch. Those things that people love about yoga classes where they come out feeling better because they've kind of stretched something out.

But it wasn't about that. In fact, it was much more about the actual yoga, which is kind of like sort of looking at yourself in the mirror and coming to understand yourself on a deeper level. Being not afraid, not as afraid to learn about yourself and how you approach things, things like the way you move and the way you kind of show up in the world.

So as we were talking before, here I realized that I was still indeed kind of powering through everything, even the little, small, slow movements. And I had not realized that before. And by doing that, by moving in that way, by that being kind of just my way of doing things, that kind of closed off a lot of possibilities for me.

Susi: But you didn't even know that you were doing that, though, right?

Beth: Oh no.

Susi: So that was all things that were totally outside of your awareness, right?

Beth: Completely. Completely. I mean, I knew that I had been a kind of driven person, that I've done a lot of different stuff in my life, and that being able to be kind of intense and drive through has kind of allowed me to do many of the things that I've done, and do them well. But I didn't know that that was also underlying my own yoga practice and my whole thinking, or my whole perception of my body and my understanding of how I move. I thought I had sort of learned to be really relaxed, or whatever the opposite of that is, sort of, I don't know, I can't think of the word.

Susi: Yeah, I mean, I think you were and are. And what I really want to highlight for people is, I really want people to get how so much around a

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persistent state of pain, physical pain is what I'll refer to here, is outside of our awareness.

And even as Beth was recognizing that she was powering through even when we were slowing it down, even we were doing small ranges of motion, which is a very common trait in what I do initially with people in movement in order to really see what's going on with their movement. To slow it down and to make it smaller helps us to see where the coordinating patterns kind of start to go awry and what we can do to support them to become a bit more coordinated.

And what's also interesting that goes alongside that is that Beth has stated she has got a driven personality. Sometimes people can have the impression that they need to let them go about themselves. They need to change their personality. And the reality is, is no. In fact, it's Beth's drive that actually helped her succeed.

It becomes this sort of after effect or result that how she is has an impact on her movement, but then how she learns about movement has an impact on who she is. But it's not getting rid of the characteristic of who she is, it's actually making it better. So she can channel the drivenness and she can channel the characteristic that we would call powering through.

And she can actually utilize that particular drive in what she's now able to do with way less pain, with way better coordination, with much smoother movement pattern because she's so much more aware of the various levels of dimmer and the various layers of who she is that might be contributing to just who she is, whether it's on the mat or whether it's in work or whether it's wherever, right?

It's an evolution. It's really a, I don't love using this word but when I've talked to other clients they've said it is a transformative experience because we're taking you from where you were, helping you become aware of some things, gaining some clarity, and out of that you gain better

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connection. And you can utilize all that feedback that comes and put the pieces together.

Because it's more than just your body, particularly when it comes to persistent physical pain, which is really the world that I hang out in, patterns need to change. Habitual patterns need to change. So when those things change, things change. You aren't the same person on the other side. The characteristics are still the same, but how they are utilized is very, very, very different.

And I don't love saying it this way, either. I think there's probably a better way of saying it because it implies something, let me just say it, which is it's like you become a better version of yourself. What I don't want people to interpret is that you weren't a worse version of yourself earlier. You were a better version of yourself there, just that you had pain in there and you weren't able to resolve it.

So in the act of resolving, in the act of reducing it, you're able to channel those characteristics in a way that just serves you so much more effectively.

Beth: And it occurs to me in all kinds of different contexts. Feedback that I've received in my life is you think too much and you're too intense. I got that a lot in yoga teacher trainings, like you think too much. Just stop thinking so much. And that used to really, really bug me because ultimately, I think it was a little bit of a cop out.

You can be a real thinker and you can have a lot of drive, and that doesn't have to be inconsistent with building your awareness. And that's been kind of a real discovery.

Susi: Yeah, there's a greater embodiment of how you're utilizing your cognitive or your thinking energy and then what you're feeling in your body, right?

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Beth: Yep.

Susi: Like there's a greater alignment between the skill that you have cognitively and the skill that you now have in tuning into your body. And so often I find when I work with people who initially might be very focused on thinking, is that they tend not to be as connected to their body, at least the ones that I see because of the work that I do.

And so then when they do connect more into their body and then they're able to utilize their amazing minds to logically process through what they're feeling, holy crapola, it's awesome. So it's like, bring on the thinkers.

I love that because if I'm able to be able to help them feel into, like both proprioceptively and interoceptively feel more into this thing called their body and the intelligence that's there. I mean, they're the ones with the brainpower to be able to really put something to work there and to really make it meaningful and significant and important to them.

Not that people who don't think as much can't do that, but I throw another kind of layer into the, oh, you think too much. I'm like, oh, bring it on. Let's maximize the said thinking power for what's really, really available to you. And to notice your body will let you know if you're overthinking.

So if we summarize this up then, if there were sort of three things, and maybe there's not three. Maybe there's four, maybe there's two. But if there are three things that you really would love someone who's listening to this who is kind of picking up on maybe some pieces around the scoliosis, or like this is the cold, hard facts is how you put it. Or maybe it's the person who has been told they think too much, or they're thinking that something has to change in them in order to get out of pain.

And I'm just throwing ideas out here. What are key points that you would love a person to hear and to know?

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Beth: You can have scoliosis, even pretty severe scoliosis, and not be in pain. You can have pretty severe scoliosis and still be strong and be able to do the things you want to do. Do not be afraid to slow things down and dial it back because for most people I imagine, if not everyone, you have to do that to gain awareness.

And if you don't build your awareness, meaning your proprioceptive skills, your interoceptive skills, all of the skills about being able to tune into sensation, then you're just kind of continuing on the same path, building strength on top of pain, as I was doing.

So I know it's terribly hard for people, and it was for me, to accept the idea that for a while here I'm going to have to dial it back. But it's so worth it for what you come out of the process with because then you can build real strength and stamina without this horrible gripping and dead spots and all this other kind of morass of stuff going on underneath it.

So that takes a lot of time. And it can feel really bad at first. Like, I thought I was good at this thing, but it turns out I can't even really do a decent lunge. Even though I've been teaching people how to do lunges for a long time. But I can't even really do it because I realize I'm doing it all with my back. That's hard to realize. It's kind of scary.

Susi: Sometimes it's what we become aware of, that it's tricky.

Beth: Yep.

Susi: And yet it's all there to serve us and help us move forward. So if we can take the information that arises from it, then we can actually make the change that we really, really, really are yearning to have.

Beth: Yeah, yeah.

Susi: So good. So, Beth, if people are listening and they're thinking, oh, this woman is making so much sense, how can someone reach you? What's the best way to reach you?

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Beth: Probably through my website, which is BethKaplanYoga.com. I'm also on Facebook as Beth Kaplan Yoga, and on Instagram as Embodied In DC.

Susi: Awesome. And we will have those links on our show notes, so you can find her there. Any final things you want to share, Beth?

Beth: The one other thing I was thinking of is that you have to step up and own the process. And I feel like that sounds kind of harsh, especially to say to someone who's in pain. And I would have been pissed if somebody said that to me. But there was a part of me that had been kind of struggling through it for so long and kind of blaming a lot of the healthcare people that I saw who didn't help, suggested unhelpful things, or said things that made me feel discouraged.

And really, I think, on some level I wanted someone to just fix me. Just fix me, you know? And the idea that that just plain isn't going to happen and that I knew at some point that nothing was going to get better for me as far as my pain unless I really kind of took control of it. And again, I just want to say that out of context that could just sound awful and really not what anyone who is in pain needs to hear. But I realize that was an issue for me.

Susi: So great.

Beth: I really needed to own it.

Susi: So, so, so great. Beth, thank you so much for being on here. As you mentioned, you can find Beth over at Beth Kaplan, K-A-P-L-A-N, BethKaplanYoga.com. She's also on Instagram and Facebook, so you can find her there too. If what we're sharing here makes a lot of sense, then do reach out to her.

And if you're interested, if you're a health professional and you're interested in learning more about the certification program or the upcoming

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therapeutic yoga intensive, you can send us an email at Health@FunctionalSynergy.com. Again, thank you so much, Beth.

Beth: Thank you, Susi, what a pleasure.

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.