

Ep #297: From Doubt to Mastery: The Journey of a Yoga Therapist



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With Your Host

Susi Hately

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Male Announcer: You're listening to *From Pain to Possibility* with Susi Hatley. 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 Hatley.

Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today we're diving into a topic that's really close to my heart and that's the evolution of the yoga therapist. And I've been thinking a lot about this title because I spoke about the evolution of the yoga therapist back in the earlier episodes of this podcast. And these days, my thinking is really like, how am I helping yoga therapists or yoga teachers evolve into yoga therapists? And how am I helping health professionals, massage therapists, OTs and PTs, integrate yoga therapy techniques into their world and moving for both groups, moving from this place of doubt to a place of mastery.

Because when we start to blend these worlds together, whether it's yoga teaching purely into yoga therapy or whether it's PT, massage therapy, or OT into the world of yoga therapy, it's really cool the evolution that arises and then the results and the impact we can have in the world. So if you've wondered what it takes to grow as a yoga therapist, to be successful as a yoga therapist, or maybe you're already on this journey and you feel a bit stuck, this episode is for you.

I've been in this field for quite a while, 30 years helping people to reduce and eradicate pain and training health professionals and yoga teachers back since 2001. It all started with my small anatomy groups. I've also taught large workshops, one-on-one clients, and my IYT accredited yoga therapy has certified over 400 yoga therapists. And what's amazing is how much I've learned, not just about others, but also myself.

I've been on that journey of evolution and to see where my certification program is now, from where it started, is really remarkable. My focus has always been on helping yoga therapists grow their skills. And it starts at the base of relaxing their nervous systems so that they can interpret what they

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see with clarity and most importantly believe in themselves because at the core of all this confidence and self-trust are game changers.

But here's the thing, growth is not a straight line. Some people, yes, they pick up the skills quickly, while others take their time. Some struggle a little bit, and others feel like they're trudging through mud. Some of the struggle is in how the embodiment of the processes is happening.

Because in the realm of the way I teach and train people in yoga therapy, we're working with both sides of the brain. We're both working with the analytical executive functioning as well as the sensing functioning. So we're working with both left and right brain.

And this can be tricky, really tricky, because the health professionals I work with, massage therapists, OTs and PTs, they've all been trained from very much a logical, formal evidence-based way. And there's like specific protocols and templates they need to follow, right? It's in line with many of their governing bodies.

So now when I'm offering up a different way of learning, it can be tricky. It can be really, really, really tricky. And for the yoga teachers, they also come in with a whole set of other skills. I mean, yoga teachers, a lot of the 200 hour programs will say, do this modification for this result. Do this like there's still very much a boxed, templated approach here is what you do in these situations, which makes sense because with 200 hours or even 500 hours, that's not a lot of training. You're just starting to get yourself in a groove of who you are as a yoga teacher, who you're serving, how you're teaching, what are you seeing.

So again, when I'm coming into this from a place of embodying, of blending both the left and the right side of our brains, of bringing in formal evidence, but also trusting the evidence of the person that's in front of us, meaning how they are moving and how they're breathing, because that's clearly evidence, it can be tricky because we're so focused, so much so, on what's outside of us, meaning the formal evidence dictating what it is that we should or shouldn't do.

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But the real genius of this process and the undercurrent of what really helps people to heal is to be able to take that evidence, to take that logical processing, and actually see if it is relevant for the person that we're working with. And so when I'm working with my trainees, that is always in the back of my mind and the fuel source for supporting people in their growth.

Initially this can be a bit, as I've said, I've said the word tricky a few times. It can be tricky, it can be a little messy, it can be a bit difficult at the beginning.

It's much like learning a language. I can feel a little bit like Tarzan, like very unsmooth. But nonetheless, no matter the pace or the challenges, however tricky or messy it feels, there is a progression. And over all the years that I've worked with people I've seen three key phases in the growth and the evolution of yoga therapists from being in a place of doubt to becoming very masterful in the way that they're processing through information and helping their people reduce and eradicate physical pain. And this episode is all about these phases and what they look like in real life.

So let's begin at the beginning because this is where it begins. It's where the yoga therapists start their journey and if I'm honest it really often is the hardest phase. Now the good news is, once this hardest phase is through, it gets a lot easier. But at the beginning, it feels a bit messy. The technical work, whether you're a PTO tier massage therapist or whether you're a yoga teacher, it can feel a bit stressful, confusing, and even mysterious.

It's like trying to learn a new language, knowing that there's poetry, but you can't quite get to the writing of the poetry yet, but you want to get to the writing of the poetry, but you're learning the new language and you're really almost desperate in some cases, but really desiring to want to write the poetry.

So I'll give you an example of imagining that you're working with a client who's experiencing a persistent state of back pain and you're observing their movement, noticing their compensations, and trying to understand what's going on. And then, dun dun dun dun, the doubt creeps in.

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Questions arise like, okay did I see that right? Am I missing something? Man, what if I, what I do or what I suggest, what if that makes it worse? And then this, the circle can go, right? And there's an ungrounded, breath-held, almost a disembodied experience that might happen.

Now, this sounds familiar. If you've been here, you know the feeling. The brain begins to swirl with what ifs. You can feel a whole lot of second guessing moving through you. It really is doubt in its embodied form. Now this can lead to a common trap, right?

The doubt, the second guessing, the what-ifs can fuel the thought process of searching for the "right way". Certainly, there must be a perfect technique or a magic template that's out there for this particular situation. So what tends to happen is that the yoga therapy trainee will look outside of themselves and at what other people are doing and thinking, okay, surely that person has figured out they've got this many people following them on Instagram or on Facebook or on TikTok, like, they must know something.

But here's the thing, and this is what I remind people at this phase about all of the time, there isn't a right way. And likewise, there's not a wrong way either. The body isn't a machine, it's a dynamic ever-changing system. And so one of the things I focus a lot on in this early phase is to help trainees focus less on finding the perfect answer, and more about learning how to sit with uncertainty.

There is such power in being able to sit with uncertainty. And I think someone really smart has a great quotation about uncertainty. And I might completely trash it, but I think it goes something like, "the quality of your life is in direct proportion to the amount of uncertainty you can comfortably be with. I think that's what it is. The quality of your life is in direct proportion to the amount of uncertainty you can comfortably be with." I think that's what it is. The quality of your life is in direct proportion to the amount of uncertainty you can be comfortable with. And I'm thinking that may have been Tony Robbins who said that, but there's a lot of truth to it.

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And when we're working with somebody and their persistent pain, this ability to be with what's uncertain is very valuable. When you're with the uncertainty, you grow presence and you grow your ability to see. So instead of your brain swirling, I help people to focus their eyes on biomechanical principles. Not so much on muscle names, but rather how the body is moving.

And the reason I do this is because this is a very objective, foundational way of watching movement. I can videotape or screen grab on my computer a client who's moving and we can both see what is or is not moving. We can clearly see from a binary perspective, something is moving or something is not moving. This helps me focus what I'm seeing and helps me focus my client on what they're seeing, right? So it's this ability to focus on something that will make a difference for the client can be so game-changing.

So again, the person might be in, the trainee might be in that place of uncertainty, and then they might swirl, and my focus is to help them be with that uncertainty so that they can grow their presence and grow their ability to really focus on what's objective. Okay? Then we start to blend in and build in the subjective in a short period following that. Not too far off but without trying to make things too ultra confusing.

What's blended with this which becomes really interesting is the yellow lights. So I talk about yellow lights and red lights and green lights. I also talk about whispers and screams. They're two different metaphors to talk about the same thing.

When someone comes to see us, those red lights, those red lights are letting us know that the body is screaming. So the aim to help a client out of pain is to start to notice the yellow lights. And then to start from the yellow lights to notice the green lights. Just like with the screams, we start to notice the whispers and the whispers and the quieter whispers and the quieter whispers.

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So I'm helping my trainees to recognize these, not only in their own bodies and as they're moving, but also in their learning process. Because a lot of people will say, well, it's a nice concept in theory, but really in practice, does it work?

And so I'm focusing them on directly paying attention to their own yellow lights and their own red lights, their own green lights, their own screams, their own whispers and getting familiar. And the reason why I focus on them here is because when they can do it with themselves they grow the ability to be present with another and this feeds into what I just mentioned a moment ago is when someone can be with the uncertainty with the other then they start to grow their ability to see.

So we blend these two worlds of their ability to feel them out their own selves, to tune into their own signals so that they're able to be that much more effectively with another person.

I know that a trainee is really getting these ideas when they start to tell me that they're talking to their clients more about their clients own yellow lights and that there's dialogue between the client and the trainee about how their body is moving because we're often trained in our medical culture that the physician or the health professional has a power over relationship, that there's like the health professional is dictating to the client. And when we're working in a yoga therapy modality, the healing relationship or what I call the healing helix really is the key relationship. And what I mean by that is we have a power with relationship not power over, but that can be a process for a trainee and a client to get to? Because we're used to being, well, we should know what we're doing with a client and direct the client. And the answer is sort of, but not really.

So when I recognize that there's an interaction that's now starting to happen and there's more conversation happening between the client and the trainee, that the pain is not just simply going down and the trainee then wants to move on to the next thing, but rather there's a dialogue about the qualities of what are now existing now that the pain is down, now we know we're into moving on to the next phase. We now have moved on to or

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moved on from a template only perspective because a template only is much like a power over perspective. I'm gonna give a template, I'm gonna give a series of exercises, now go off and do them.

Now as the person, as a trainee has evolved, there's a back and forth between the client and the trainee of, "oh, this is what I'm noticing in my body. I'm now noticing when I'm not compensating or when I am compensating and I recognize these particular yellow lights, I recognize these particular whispers." Now we've got this foundation. Now, initially, yes, it can be messy because we're moving through a number of different patterns or beliefs around the way a healing or a healthy relationship should look like. We're moving through this tendency towards exercise protocols and templates and into something different. We're learning about the foundations of language, which will lead to the poetry that really is what a healing relationship and a healing process is. So with that, I want you to think about where you're at. Do you find yourself second-guessing yourself a lot? Do you feel or do you notice that you're looking for answers outside of yourself? And just take a moment and notice what's coming up.

Which moves us on to the next phase which is where things really start to shift and begin a little bit more fun. And I mentioned this already just as we finished up the first phase because when there's that dialogue back and forth with a client and there's this working together because this is what I'm seeing this is what I'm feeling we're blending the objective in the subjective worlds.

I can talk with a client about their binary biomechanical patterns then they're gonna feed back to me what they feel in addition to them noticing their objective patterns. And the blending of that information, of that data, can now fuel so much creativity in me.

And I share that because that's what happens for the trainees as they become more present, as they become more comfortable and confident in teaching someone about the binary aspects of biomechanical movement patterns and are then present enough to be able to hear the subjective realities a person is experiencing as they move their body.

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So are they feeling tension? Are they feeling pain? Are they feeling freedom? Are they feeling a release? Are they feeling relaxed? And then does that match with what they see? This starts to become less hard, more easeful and so much more enjoyable.

Let me paint a picture for you. Imagine you've been working with a client for a few months. At first perhaps you were hyper focused on every little detail trying to figure out what was wrong. But now you're starting to see patterns. You're noticing how their movement is changing, how their body is adapting and instead of feeling like oh my gosh what am I gonna do, doubting and swirling in your brain, you are now feeling curious, excited.

This is the phase where now we're beginning to delight in the mystery of the body. The trainee starts to notice that there's less of a desire to demystify everything and starts appreciating all the various layers that make up the human existence.

Some people will know me as somebody who's like, you know, I sometimes can rage against the machine around people saying that pain is complex, and this might be an episode for later. And I know that pain is complex, but I find that sometimes people stop there.

They're like, well, pain's complex, I can't fix it, so I guess I just have to live with it. But rather, what happens in this phase is that the trainee is beginning to appreciate the complexity. They see the layers and they recognize there's a through line and they can start to work with how we enable someone to move forward with this and actually enable the reduction and eradication of physical pain and not simply managing some complexity.

This shift in perspective is powerful because they realize that out of this mind shift that's happened because of this experience they've had, they do have impact and influence. But here's the rub, they're not solely responsible for their client's result. And this is so powerful. Let me say that again. They realize they have impact and influence, but they're not solely responsible for their client's results. It's game-changing, fundamentally

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game-changing. It takes the pressure off and creates space for true collaboration.

There's another big change too, which is this idea of right and wrong really starts to fade. The therapists begin to see that, you know, what works for one person might not work for another, even if they have the same condition. It's not about finding a universal solution because there are no universal solutions. It's really about meeting the client where they're at.

And if you've grown the presence and the ability to see and build the biomechanical technical skill, you really can understand compensatory patterns and not go down the rabbit hole of muscle names and this muscle needs to stretch and this muscle needs to get stronger but really simply seeing a person in their movement you really are meeting a person where they're at.

And it's at this phase with this ability to see more and be that much more clear in their presence that the yoga therapy trainees really start to connect the dots. And they see how changes in movement, how the body absorbs and dissipates force and load, impact the whole ecosystem called a human being. And they start to notice the patterns in their own lives too.

For example, in their own lives, they might realize that their own calendar is a bit too packed, that their boundaries need some fine tuning. And instead of feeling overwhelmed by it, they feel empowered to make changes.

It reminds me of a story of one of my trainees when she reached this phase and she said, "Suzi, for the first time, I feel like I'm dancing with my clients instead of trying to choreograph every step." There's just this interaction, this play. It's a very lovely way to describe this. So now with this phase take a moment and consider. Now first of all, celebrate that you've come a long way from the swirling doubt from the beginning. What are you now noticing about your work? About your body of work? Maybe about your life that feels different now.

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Which moves us to the final phase, which is where everything begins to click and the therapists begin to soar. And this is really fun in the yoga therapy certification program because we'll see this in the last few months of their technical training where they're starting to see the poetry. They're able to write poetry with the language they learned in that first phase and they've stepped into their power.

They've experienced the magic of listening not just in hearing the words but tuning into the deeper conversation to the unspoken layers right so they can hear what's being said but also hear what's not being said. They know that feeling leads to healing and they've redefined healing as an ever-evolving process of love, connection, and awareness.

In this phase, results matter, but not because of ego, but because results are a reflection of alignment. Yoga therapists know that when they listen to the whispers, they don't have to hear the screams. And really recognizing these whispers or the yellow lights, they've really gained a fluency and a mastery of being able to recognize them. They can spot the subtle signals and they can make adjustments with more and more grace and efficiency. And they're able to communicate and teach them to their and with their clients. And they really see how the healing helix plays out.

Truly they are now in the realm of power with relationships and not power over. And perhaps more importantly what I see with my trainees as they come through towards graduation is they're really seated in themselves. They've learned to love themselves in a whole new way and that love that for themselves really begins to radiate out with their clients. There's calmness, there's clarity, there's understanding, there's knowing. So if this is where you are or where you aspire to be, know that it's possible. Growth isn't about getting it right. It's about embracing the process of trusting yourself and showing up with a whole ton of love and curiosity because those really are what fuel this whole process of healing.

So this might really, really resonate with you. And if it does, we are beginning our enrollment now for the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive, as well as my IYT accredited yoga therapy certification program. And if this is

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something you would like to be a part of, I would love for you to check out <https://functionalsynergy.com/intensive>. And that is the first step along the way.

You can also go to the site <https://functionalsynergy.com> and send us a message there about your interest in the program. It would be so much fun to support you on your journey of either integrating yoga therapy into your health professional practice or as a yoga teacher moving into that next step of really helping people with this powerful, powerful aspect of healing called yoga.

You have a great, great rest of your day and we'll see you next time.