

Ep #298: Is Healing Pain Complex



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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 am so glad that you're here today because we're diving into a topic that has a real deep meaning and I've talked about this through this whole podcast because it's really the essence of what it is that I do and I brought up last week with one of my training cohorts and it generated some really, really great discussion. It's all about this notion around healing pain. Healing pain, and is it complex or is it not complex, is pain complex?

Let me just ask in a form of the question and that is, is pain and is healing pain really as complex as it's often made out to be? And out of the conversation that I had with my training group, there is clearly, if we look at just the definition of complexity, like there's a whole lot of moving parts, sure. There's a whole lot of layers to this thing called pain and that makes it complex.

However, my point to the problem, if I can label it as a problem, is that while the current drumbeat in the rehabilitation world is that pain is complex. That statement is often leading to a lot of resignation for a lot of professionals, which is not super helpful and it trickles down to clients. And so I want my focus for this episode to add another lens of possibility.

I've been following the world of pain science for a really long time, so before anyone thinks I'm trashing anything of what is being said, I am not. I am simply highlighting how a critical mass of health professionals who I have interacted with, including physicians, chiropractors, PTs, OTs, yoga therapists and yoga teachers, Pilates and fitness professionals. They'll kind of shrug their shoulders and say, well, you know, you know what pain is complex. There's not much I can do. Can we just change the subject?

I remember a conversation I had with a yoga teacher trainer, and she's also a yoga therapy trainer and a yoga therapist, who outrightly said to me that,

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talking about a client who's, the pain levels will be the best they will ever be. And I was sort of a bit gobsmacked and shocked to hear someone say that because that's telling me that they actually don't believe in the plasticity of the human body being, nervous system, the plasticity of beliefs, the availability for change.

To me, when I hear that statement, those are professionals who have a belief that pain is to be managed. That pain isn't something that really can reduce long-term or even eradicate. So really all in all it makes sense that the folks that I've interacted with who do have that thickness of resignation, it makes sense that they have it. They don't have a lot of measures of success when the focus or belief is on managing pain or that pain isn't something that can be reduced or even eradicated.

So it makes sense that they're in this headspace of a never-ending management cycle where the goal becomes more of surviving rather than thriving because pain is simply always going to be there. You got to manage it, so you might as well live a great life and have this bucket of rocks that you're carrying around called pain. So it makes sense because the approach then will keep people stuck in a loop of coping strategies rather than exploring deeper healing opportunities.

So if you've been following this podcast for any length of time, you know that one of my realities is that pain can be reduced or even eliminated for a longer period of time. And I can say this because over the course of 30 years of helping people reduce and eradicate pain and training teachers and health professionals to do the same, that's what I've seen.

I'm all about helping to facilitate change. And knowing my process, it's not that complex. Yes, there are layers. And yes, there is absolutely work to do, but is it actually complex? This is where I say I don't think so. I think life is complex. I think humans are complex. I think the human system is complex and human relationships are complex. But within all of that, there's also this really lovely thread of simplicity.

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And it may be that because I don't come from a medical trained profession and I don't have all sorts of bells and whistles that I work with, that my process has had to be simple because it's had to be simple. When I help someone sense into themselves and into their own rhythm, remarkable change is possible.

So this will be a two-part series. First, like in this episode, I'm gonna be talking more about my overarching beliefs, about pain and how I think about it and how these inform my work.

And then in the next episode, I'm gonna share my very brand new official functional synergy toolkit, which supports these beliefs and actions. So the first one is that pain is a signal and not a state. And so to me, pain at its essence is a signal. And I think about it as the body or mind or spirit's way of waving a red flag and saying, hey, something's off, please pay attention.

Now we know clearly that pain and tissue damage are not correlated, right? You can have pain and have tissue damage. You can have pain and not have tissue damage. You can have no pain and have tissue damage, and you can have no pain and have no tissue damage. So those things aren't correlated. However, there is something that is off, And that's where we can get curious because oftentimes with persistent states of pain, the pain isn't where the actual problem is, which can be shocking for a lot of people, both clients and professionals alike, because the tendency for any human being is to want to get rid of the painful sensation.

But if we can shift our perspective from how do I get rid of pain to being asking, okay, what is this sensation asking of me? And as the health professional, I'm wondering what is being asked here? What's being asked to be noticed here? So it's one of curiosity. It has me very, very, very curious. We'll get to another point here around safety, but curiosity to me is the hallmark of safety. You have to have curiosity to have safety and you have to have safety to actually make change here.

So when we can lead with curiosity as opposed to how the F do I get rid of this, which has a layer of tension and not a whole bunch of safety. So for

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example, when a client has an introductory session with me and we spend a good amount of time talking about their body diagram and the story of what they're feeling and all things that are associated with what's on their body diagram, what happens is that as we engage, as I understand the colored areas of that body that they want to resolve, I get to have an understanding of what's underlying it, what's in their story. I get to keep my mouth closed, my ears and heart open, and I learn about their body, their beliefs, their dreams, their desires, their determination. And did you notice I did not say goals?

I said I get to learn about their body, their beliefs, their dreams, their desires, and determinations. And that gives me so much information about what those sensations are actually saying. And then as we begin to move and breathe and explore compensatory patterns and start to resolve some of that patterning, the pain begins to change, the tissue begins to change and more insight begins to be revealed. And this leads people to see what's actually possible. And some of those beliefs or those dreams, those desires, the fuel of determination, those start to really come alive, maybe even change in some cases.

So once we stop seeing pain as this permanent state and start treating it as a message, as an opportunity for a conversation, then we begin to address more than just some screaming symptoms. And when I start with a simple conversation of me mostly listening to all the things the person is saying or not saying about their body and their pain, it really leads us to the next point, which is that the body has innate healing wisdom.

Our bodies are incredible. We are wired for healing and recovery. Every time you get a paper cut, your body leaps into action to repair the tissue. You don't have to think about it or give it complex instructions, it just happens. And the healing wisdom applies to pain too. In a sense, when pain persists, it's often because the body's natural healing processes are blocked or disrupted. And these disruptions can come from a host of places like under recovery and chronic stress, poor sleep, unhelpful movement patterns. And the beauty is, all of these things can shift.

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And I'll be the first person to say that my clients don't need to have full scale change in any of these to make a change in their levels of pain. They simply need progress. So much of the time, it's why I begin with movement. It's objective, relatively binary, the arm moves or it doesn't move, there's compensation or there isn't. And then I can go on and help a person retrain and as they retrain we often see better patterns of relaxation, of recovery, of better sleep. Do you see that? Which can physiologically shift how stress is or isn't managed.

Now, if this sounds too good to be true, understand that when there are small successes in how someone feels when they move, it changes throughout their body and their brain and their mind.

And I will say I do, as their teacher, play a huge part because when there is success, I raise my proverbial pom-poms and I rock it out with my client. And they will look at me like I'm a bit of a weirdo and a bit of a goof, but I do it because it's highlighting success in a way that has been a vital, vital ingredient to hone a new pattern of movement, to hone a new pattern of breathing and being. And I think out there in our rehabilitation world, we don't celebrate success nearly as much.

When I can highlight the success of a new pattern of movement, I'm highlighting that it's not about complexity, but it's about clearing a path for your body and mind to do what it already knows how to do, which really leads to point number three, which is these small consistent actions leading to big results. And there's a lot of metaphors in the world out there about small things bit by bit, step by step. I think about like the one domino, you kick it over, then it kicks over the next domino, the next domino, next domino, and then the whole thing's over.

And one of the biggest myths about healing and recovery is that it requires drastic and complex interventions, when in reality, it's the small consistent actions that have the most significant results most of the time. And it's why I tend to begin with what I call granular movement. And yes, I mean, I have a Bachelor of Science in kinesiology, I have a general affinity towards biomechanics, so I naturally gravitate to the body first and by showing

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people the relationship to small movements and retraining neuromuscular movement patterns, those small movements become bigger because I'm improving the motor control and coordination between the brain and the body.

During this retraining process there's often a natural relaxation or settling or downregulation as my client learns and understands and sees progress. And they can also see how or if they're breath holding and then integrate breath practices and that continues to facilitate change very quickly. The key here is consistency. It's a drumbeat of small baby steps, helping to improve neuromuscular patterning and habitual change. And truly, truly, truly, I can't stress how valuable and insightful this is, how confidence boosting it is.

This bit by bit, step by step, one domino at a time, they are doing it to themselves and for themselves. And they grow their own inner locus of control. And I can't tell you how foundational and fundamental that is. And that really leads to point 4.

Patterns of pain are surprisingly predictable. And while every person's experience of pain is unique, the underlying patterns that sustain their pain and also reduce their pain are surprisingly consistent for them. And all the previous steps that lead to this recognition of patterns. At its core, there's a lot of habit here. And when we can start to shift that habit, that habitual pattern, through, for example, working with movement, reducing compensation patterns, this retraining can be so incredibly helpful.

Our habitual patterns contribute to how we feel, how pain or tension or strain manifest. And when we can see this for real, the change in movement first and see these predictable patterns begin to shift, then these patterns seem a little less difficult to change. And as a result, those moments or those periods or those factors contributing to unresolved stress or poor or under recovery, those factors outside of ourselves have less of an impact on us. We become more able to make change.

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And as I mentioned with the dominoes, we start with that first domino and then progress leads to progress. Like it's easy to fall into that trap of like, okay, I've got my movement better now, but there's all these other factors in my life. And man, trust me, I get it. I'll be sharing more about things that have happened in my own family, certainly factors outside of myself, which were unresolved stress, led to under-recovery, and had an impact on the way that I was feeling. And as I continued to improve myself, then those factors outside of me actually began to change because I began to change. And that's a whole podcast, a whole chapter, a whole book really in what I just said there, but it's so fundamentally amazingly impactful because safety starts with us.

We know that when our brains interpret a symptom as being a threat or dangerous or concerning our signals will amp up. And if it doesn't see it as a threat, the signals will calm down. So when we create a sense of safety in ourselves, then paying signals can diminish. Now we can do that in an initial way of like mindfulness and calming practices and yoga nidra and nurturing environments and that's all external to us and as we use these things and we start to realize that we have control, that internal locus of control is the greatest sense of safety we can develop and have.

The NOI Institute, David Butler and Laura Marmosly talk about dims and sims. And a lot of the Sims that I hear out there in the world are outside of ourselves But the biggest and most powerful Sim is the one inside now I talk about Dims and Sims in an episode and put that in the show notes so you can dig more into that if you would like to learn more about dims and sims. They're powerful and when we can nurture and recognize that safety actually begins inside of us as I've mentioned it's incredibly powerful.

It doesn't require elaborate rituals or expensive treatments. Some of the simplest techniques can be deep breathing and spending time in nature. And when you are doing those deep breaths and when you're spending that time in nature what are you noticing? What other things are bubbling up that are worthy of paying attention to? Now you can start to make some deeper changes, some more specific changes.

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All in all this process is one of restoring art, reinventing, it's one of listening deeply. It's not about reinventing the wheel. It's restoring the body's natural functions. It's about listening to pain as a signal of supporting your body's innate healing wisdom and focusing on small consistent actions so you can simplify the process and make it manageable.

And if you're feeling stuck or overwhelmed, if you're feeling like this is hard, I know how easy it is to fall into the trap of pain is complex and healing is even more so. The reality for me is that humans and life are complex and that's part of the beauty of it all. And when we can recognize that, we don't have to solve the complexity, we just need to address it, meaning that's just what it is. And let's get to work. Let's get to work on exploring the layers and peeling it back, working in a space of safety, and seeing what's possible.

If you believe that healing is possible, if you believe that pain can be reduced, I can help.

If you are a health professional, typically it's OTs, PTs, and massage therapists who come and train with me. If you're feeling a little resigned to that statement of pain is complex, but there's a little voice inside of you that's like, well, yeah, and I think there's some really amazing ways that we can help people heal. That they don't have to be stuck in a place of pain. They don't have to manage pain.

I've helped people with autoimmune conditions have much, much less flares, much less, if any at all. It doesn't mean their condition is gone, it means the way that it's physiologically expressing itself is entirely different. I've helped my husband retrain through PTSD and hypervigilance, so he's in a place that is entirely different than he was 18 months ago.

I've helped people who've had persistent pain for years be able to feel into their bodies again, interoceptively and proprioceptively, and really recognize what those things are in their body and supporting them in that retraining process so that they don't have as much or they have no pain at all.

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I'd love to help you and we're running our therapeutic yoga intensive coming up and you can read more about it over at <https://functionalsynergy.com/intensive> and do come back next week because I'll be introducing our functional synergy toolkit, which I'm super delighted that we have it official now.

If you're listening to this and you're not a professional or you're a professional with pain, but you're someone with pain, whether you're a professional or not a professional, I can also help you. I have a series of private sessions that I work with people in a three-month series. I also have a whole host of smaller, less commitment-oriented movement practices that incorporate yoga, breath, therapeutic applications of biomechanics where you can start your process of tuning into your body. And you can find those over at <https://functionalsynergy.com>.

You have a great day, we'll see you next time. Take care.