Ep. #304 - Bridging Yoga with Rehab, PT, and Functional Movement



Full Episode Transcript
With your host:
Susi Hately

From Pain to Possibility with Susi Hately

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Introduction 00:00:01 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. Screen. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Susi 00:00:23 Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here, because today I'm delving into what I think is a big topic, only because it's been coming up an awful lot in my conversations with yoga teachers, with physical therapists, occupational therapists, massage therapists who all love yoga. And it's about bridging the gap between yoga rehabilitation and functional movement. And I'm loving this because this has been something I've been doing for 30 years. I started my career in a center at the time, we called it a "chronic pain center" just after I graduated with my Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology, and then I got into yoga at about the same time. So I've been doing this integration for a really, really long time, and I've seen the trajectory that yoga has taken, and I've seen the trajectory that physical therapy and traditional rehabilitation and the way medicine views yoga and different forms of rehabilitation, I've seen this trajectory over these past decades, and it's really fun.

Susi 00:01:17 And it's a rich, rich time for this opportunity to integrate between these fields of medicine, of traditional rehabilitation, yoga and functional movement, and frankly, reducing and eliminating physical pain, because that's really what I am all about. So if you've ever had a student or a client dealing with physical pain, recovering from an injury, or struggling with mobility, and you weren't really sure exactly how to help them without making things worse, the reality is you're not alone. There are so many yoga teachers who are also struggling with this and this is really where we get to continue the rethinking process of yoga. And I say continue, because this has been a conversation that's been ongoing for a number of years and it's... the timing is just really ripe now to really recognize that yoga asana are not a fixed set of poses, and they're not fixed poses. They're not static poses. They truly are a movement practice where we are moving into and out of these positions.

Susi 00:02:31 So there's a few things I want to dig into today. One is that, like, where traditional alignment cues are headed, meaning: for the trash can, I think, because I think a lot of traditional alignment cues really are not helping students or clients as much as we think; the biggest mistakes that I see yoga teachers make when working with pain and rehabilitation with their students; and how to start seeing movement differently so you can teach it in a way that really helps your students move better and not just look better in poses. So let's really dig into it. Before, though, I get into these pieces, I have to say something because I've been pondering how I was going to integrate this piece into this episode, and I couldn't find a way where it would fit in seamlessly. So I'm just going to make it more sort of crass and bold and just say it right here, and that is: something I've said for a long, long time after I read in some of the yoga philosophy books, is that the reality is that asana, when it's loosely translated, means sitting comfortably and still.

Susi 00:03:38 It's a state of being. It's not a static pose. And even though more in the past ten years we've been talking about shapes rather than poses, there's still this noun that's associated with thesethis part of the yoga practice and the reality is, in my mind, is that asana is a "being." It's a verb, it's a "doing." And my students and my trainees who really fundamentally get this, are the ones who both get out of pain the quickest, and for the trainees who become my graduates, they're the ones who help their clients heal the quickest. Because we can get our heads wrapped up in a way about poses and shapes, that really kind of messes up the whole thing and it misses out on the beauty and really the magic of yoga and what yoga can really, really provide. And unfortunately, with some of how yoga has been translated over in the West, I think the whole "position, pose and shape" thing, the whole "posture" thing really misses out on where yoga can be very, very, very helpful.

Susi 00:04:43 And when I think about how physical therapists have been trained to integrate it, it starts to become just another form of an exercise. And what I'm hoping through my whole podcast overall, but also with this episode, is that I can kind of open the door, open the gate here to a different belief, or a new belief or a refined belief, an up-leveled belief, depending on where you're at in this conversation of, like, we're looking at movement as not only a start and an end, but how we are doing it. Right? The "how." Like, so often people are given exercises to do, but there's not the "how" or the quality of the movement that's being thought about too much. So I'm hoping that by saying that we can provide another layer of context to this conversation as we get into these pieces. So let's dig in and we'll start with the first piece, which is what I see as being missing in traditional yoga. And for years we can think and remember, depending on how long you've been in the practice that yoga has been taught, with a huge focus on alignment. Huge focus.

Susi 00:05:50 And when I got into yoga, this is back in like mid 90s, there was the influence of the day was Iyengar. And Iyengar still is influential because a lot of the primary teachers who are still around and still doing some amazing teaching, were influenced by Iyengar in some way. And so there's still the idea of alignment, even though some of the cueing and some of the instruction and what we know about alignment with the infiltration of biomechanics and anatomy into the yoga practice, we have a better understanding; however, there's still this alignment. Talk around like stack your joints, square your hips, drop your shoulders, and certain ways and proper ways of breathing, so to speak. Right? And it's kind of based on like, this is the way things should "look." This is what the "shape" should look like. And that really is the focus in the 200-hour and the 500-hour teacher trainings, which, I mean, makes sense and I've said this before it makes a lot of sense because those trainings are not about helping people get out of pain.

Susi 00:06:45 They're about helping the trainee who's going to become a yoga teacher, like, get in front of a room and teach people and walk them through sequences, right? So they're looking for the best ways, the most efficient ways for being able to do that. And so it's "alignment" tends to be the go-to way. It just kind of... there's a missed opportunity there. And the teacher training programs that I know that have a different view on this, and that really look at it from a functional movement place and sidestep the alignment conversation completely,

really do a real service to the industry, I think, and produce some teachers that aren't... that don't get stuck in a paradigm of "alignment." And that's a really difficult paradigm to step out of, being someone who trains yoga therapists and yoga therapists have the tendency to have been 200and 500-hour teachers and that "alignment" conversation can come into the training, and it's a very difficult paradigm to move out of. So it's... yet it's necessary if you're going to be successful in helping clientele reduce and eradicate pain.

Susi 00:07:50 You really do need to step out of that "alignment" conversation in order to be able to work with people in an individualized, customized, and truly in an effective way. So the aim here is to support better movement function. So again, and like, maybe you're asking the question: okay, but what's wrong with the "alignment?" So you've said all these things. But the reality is that, you know, our bodies aren't symmetrical and nor are they perfectly aligned all the time. And people can have posture that doesn't "look" good but be fine, and walk around just fine. Like, better posture is not correlated to pain reduction. Let me say that again: better posture is not correlated to pain reduction. And there's research evidence to outline this. And I've seen this all of the time too within my practice. People can bring a chin back or tuck a tailbone or to put their parts in a better alignment, and they can create more tension and more strain and more pain. I see that more often than not.

Susi 00:08:49 And the other piece of it is we do compensate. Everybody compensates. And so really, in the line of work that I'm playing with, I'm addressing the compensations but this is important better alignment doesn't change compensations. In fact, better alignment often leads to more compensations. Because what happens is someone begins to see something in a movement pattern and they go: oh, that's bad, that's not good alignment. So we better do this other thing to make the alignment better. But then that other thing is a compensation. Let me give you an example, because that probably just sounded very confusing. So a really, really common one that consistently happens is if someone brings her arms up overhead and then we see the ribs start to flare, flare forward. And a common thing that people say is: okay, we better bring those ribs back down. So then the cue becomes pull the ribs in, and then they hold the upper abdominal muscles really hard or tough or gripped to keep those ribs down. And now the alignment "looks" better because the ribs aren't flaring but nothing has actually shifted because we haven't looked at, well, what's contributing to why those ribs are flaring in the first place.

Susi 00:09:49 And when we're looking at arms coming overhead, if they're coming forward and up, it's that I'm just going to use a layman's language that arm bone, aka the humerus, is moving in the shoulder socket and that shoulder blade, aka the scapula, needs to be moving into an upward rotation to enable that arm to come overhead. So if there's anything stuck inside of that rhythm of movement between the humerus or the arm bone and the shoulder socket, and then the shoulder blade or scapula, if there's something up in the rhythm of those pieces, then the way that someone brings their arm up is likely or not surprisingly, I should say going to facilitate this root flare. So if we just focus on "oh, that rib flare is not good, pull the ribs in" and now when you go up into this arm overhead movement, make sure those ribs are in, but it doesn't actually shift what's going on between the arm bone and the shoulder blade and the rib cage.

Susi 00:10:50 So when you start to address that now we start to actually make some changes, right? So we don't want to force someone into a correct shape or position, but we actually need to watch what these pieces are doing. How are these body parts relating? And when we can zoom in to the specific joint so in this particular scenario it's the shoulder joint we zoom into that shoulder joint, it's like okay so what's actually going on here? Right? What's working? Right? What's not working? What should be working? When you're able to see this as a yoga teacher in your students in front of you, when you can see this as a PT or as a massage therapist, when you're working with your patients or your clients, we can become so much more effective in what we're providing in terms of movement, prescription and also instruction or cueing. So it's not these universal cues which is a complete myth it's not universal cues, it's cueing or instructing based off of this individual who has this movement pattern.

Susi 00:11:58 This is where we get to retrain patterns as opposed to focusing on alignment. And the cool thing is that when you retrain the movement pattern, you ultimately actually improve the alignment and you actually improve the posture. So these things that we're actually wanting occur quite by happenstance and as a result, we're just using a different vehicle. We're using the retraining of movement pattern. Right? So the key here is we're not aiming to make something aesthetically aligned. We're actually helping people have their biomechanics and their kinesiology just function better. And it's in the act of functioning better i.e. retraining patterns that leads to both pain reduction, better functional movement, better strength, better stability, and better mobility. Because now the proper body parts that are supposed to be doing the movement i.e. not the rib cage, aren't doing the movement, but we're not adding a gripping pattern in order for that to happen.

Susi 00:13:06 Okay, so then let's move into the next one, which is the three biggest mistakes that I see yoga teachers making and I hear yoga teachers making and that I have the opportunity to help retrain. And again, even though I'm calling these mistakes, there's nothing wrong here. Again, in our 200and 500-hour teacher trainings, the focus, the intent of those programs is to get people sufficiently trained so that they can lead these classes. And so it's like a base level foundation. There's only so much that can be taught in a 200 and 500. So you'll be finding yourself, as the yoga teacher you'll be finding yourself feeling a little ill equipped. And again, that's not a bad thing like, you had the training you've had and it's a foundational training. It's not all of it. And so now you get to grow your capacity and your capability to be able to see movement and then make different choices for how you then instruct it. Yeah? So I really want to emphasize that, even though I just highlighted this as the "biggest mistake." So the first one is overcorrecting alignment without understanding why. And this really is a bit of a double whammy because as I mentioned a moment ago, the alignment conversation is a little tricky and can get people, both the teacher and the student, the PT and the patient or client, the massage therapist and their client, it can be tricky for all of those groups, right?

Susi 00:14:19 So you're looking at the student who looks misaligned and then there's this desire to correct them, to put the parts in the right spot. Right? Kind of like we're Lego people or stacks of blocks and we just need to push this piece in here and this piece in here. "Oh, look,

there looks to be too much lower doses in the back. Let's tuck the tailbone or lengthen the tailbone. Oh, those ribs are poking out, pull them in. Bring that chin in." But think about it. There's a reason why those parts are in the positions that they are in. And a big reason for this is that it is the safest and most supported place that a person finds themselves, right? Like, the reason we choose the postures that we choose is because that's where our nervous system feels the safest. So now we're kind of another double whammy, which is we're saying you're doing that wrong, which is kind of saying to someone: what you deem safe is wrong. Right?

Susi 00:15:15 Just think about that for a second. And then the other piece is we're trying to make a change to that by superimposing what's right, but it's not addressing the functional patterns that led to the position in the first place. So let me give you an example of this that I love, love, love to share. So I had a trainee who's now a grad and she's doing amazing work, and she had a client when she was a trainee who had a real kyphosis in through his thoracic spine, so quite rounded up in that rib cage area. And he also had back pain. And she really wanted to undo the kyphosis by putting him over a bolster. Right? Like, classic "let's stretch out the front of the body in order to open up the chest and the shoulders." Right? Really, really common first step for a teacher with an untrained eye and who's growing their eye. Yeah? And yet she was concerned about doing this, rightly so, because of the fellow's back pain. And she didn't want to increase the backbend because she was afraid that that might cause more back pain, which can happen.

Susi 00:16:21 So then I reminded her, I said: so remember what I said about posture and how posture is the safest and most supportive place that someone chooses, and it's subconscious, and even though it might look really awful to us or horrible or whatever word you want to use just like, wow, that looks like bad posture it's the best posture that their system feels is right for them. So then with that in mind, how do you support someone to feel more supported? How do you create more safety in them so that this other posture arises as a result, which is sort of what I was referring to in the first segment, right? How can we retrain alongside this idea of safety so the nervous system and not just the nervous system, like the whole entire being feels safer? Because what you'll find is when you retrain in that way, the coordinating patterns will naturally evolve into a better posture. So then she's thinking: oh, okay, I need to actually work with the person's biomechanics in a different way.

Susi 00:17:28 And then she came up with a program, which I'm not going to get into today. I know some of you are thinking "oh, just get into that" and like, I can't get into that now because it will make this podcast episode way, way too long, but I will explain it more in an upcoming episode. That episode will be about planes of movement and biomechanics, so stay tuned for that and I'll make sure to reference this episode when I do talk about that one. So she came up with a new plan connecting biomechanics and kinesiology relative to this person's scenario. And lo and behold, the back pain went away. And then after about a week to ten days, the upper body position started to change. So the piece here that's important is she was stepping away from "alignment," recognizing the nervous system, connection, motor control and coordination along with biomechanics, and was able to support them in the person to retrain patterns which

both supported the back and enabled the back to get to a place that felt better, but also shifted the posture.

Susi 00:18:33 But the posture change, again, was a result. It wasn't the focus. Okay, so then number two: a really common mistake is that thinking that flexibility or strength is the solution, when really what's missing is coordination. And I used that word already in this episode. There's so much talk around "we've got to increase flexibility. We've got to increase mobility. We've got to increase strength." And that might be... all three things might happen at once, or they might be different scenarios for different people that "I just need to... I just need to release. I need to get more flexible. I need to get more mobile. I need to get stronger." A reality that I have seen over and over again is that people can work with the tools of flexibility, mobility, strengthening, stability, and not change the underlying movement patterns. So again, it's not dissimilar to looking at yoga poses as static, a lot of people will look at exercises as static; like, just give me the set of exercises that need to be done to solve for this.

Susi 00:19:46 But they're not looking actually at the coordination and the coordination of the pieces, right? So the rhythm of the shoulder blade to the arm bone, as I mentioned in the example above, the relationships between the arm bone or the humerus, shoulder blade or scapula and the and the rib cage and how the rib cage flares or doesn't flare. And that's not necessarily a "muscle" conversation or even a "fascial" conversation. Those might come into it. It's a "relational" conversation and of the coordination of those pieces. So I liken the following step-by-step way of thinking to help in bringing this idea to life, and that is: we can think about the nervous system, the muscular system, which can also I'm just going to use that as a short form for myofascial system and then the skeletal system. And the myofascial system moves the skeletal system. And the nervous system tells the myofascial system when to contract and when to release, and how fast or how slow to go.

Susi 00:20:52 And we can go after and say "okay, I need to do this with the rotator cuff, I need to do this with the lats. I need to do this with the upper abdominal muscles." I'm reflecting back to the example above. And address those muscular scenarios that are moving the bone, and you'll get a certain result. What I'm talking about here is the conversation between the nervous system and the myofascial system. And this is where the motor control and coordination happen. Oftentimes when compensation patterns are occurring, oftentimes when someone's recovering from injury there is a miscommunication between the nervous system and the myofascial system; that there is this misfiring, I sometimes call it, and there's compensation patterns kicking in, because the conversation that's meant to be happening is somewhat skewed in some way. And so a piece of the puzzle is quieting the compensation pattern. But to quiet the compensation pattern by doing so, by improving interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness. So let me really be clear about this distinction: we can apply an exercise and say "this exercise is for this muscle group. And this muscle group is weak in your body, or this muscle group is tight in your body. Here is an exercise that will change that tightness or will change that weakness. Or there's that muscle group is not stable or not flexible."

Susi 00:22:02 Fill in whatever word you want to say you want to use. And so then that exercise, it becomes something to do to change that, whether it's stability, flexibility, strength, mobility; and then the person applies it. It's like this external thing that someone then does to their body in an attempt to make a change. But what they're possibly not doing is not connecting to their interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness. Meaning, how is that arm bone actually moving in the shoulder socket? What are you feeling as you do the movement? This awareness piece is so fundamental. The other week I was working with someone who has a lot of pain. She also has rheumatoid arthritis, and one of the things that I was working with her on is I showed her my mini skeleton, and I moved the arm bone up and down because this is one of the exercises we were doing, and it wasn't just "okay, I want you to move your arm bone up and down."

Susi 00:23:01 I was saying: okay, now this part of where your humerus or your arm bone is, isn't in the socket it's around about in this area where the seam of your shirt is. Can you feel that arm bone moving in the socket? Like, I'm not asking for the head of that arm bone like feeling that specifically, but can you distinguish between the arm bone and distinguish between the shoulder socket. And can you find that? And she's like yep I can now find that. Okay, perfect. Okay, now that's proprioception. Can you feel that in-space? Okay, now what are you feeling as you move? And she's like, well, I got the range of motion, I can feel the range of motion but in this part of the range of motion, my pain is increasing. And then I said, okay, so now move in the range where the pain is not increasing. In fact, can we find the range where your pain is decreasing?

Susi 00:23:49 And the range got a bit smaller initially but she found it. And then as a result of that, her pain symptoms went down dramatically. And she's sort of like gobsmacked. Like how did that happen? So I see this all the time. So people can do the exercise that I mentioned a moment ago for whatever that thing is: strength, flexibility, mobility, stability. And they might get more flexibility, mobility, strength or stability but their pain doesn't change because one of the missing pieces is like, okay, how are you actually doing this? Can you actually perceive proprioceptive interoceptively while you're doing it? And can you, as the teacher, or the PT or the massage therapist, are you actually teaching them to feel these pieces? And frankly, a lot of people aren't teaching that. They aren't teaching someone how to actually perceive this. They're telling them what they "should" feel. And so then as a result, the person's not coming from an internal perspective on what's going on in their body, it's an external perspective. They're trying to make something happen to their body.

Susi 00:24:48 And then as a result, a lot of that pain symptom doesn't go down in a consistent way. It's... in a sense they're adding more compensation to the mix. So then the third piece of it is: not training variability and movement. And a big piece in in enabling people to reduce and eradicate pain is having the awareness piece, having an adaptability piece which is part of the variability piece. And if we only move in fixed patterns, we lose that ability to adapt. We lose our nimbleness. We lose our ability to move from fast to slow and slow to fast, go down to the floor and then back up again. And it's our reason why some people don't make progress, is that they kind of stick with a certain set of movement sequences, but don't get it to that next level. And the

key is that, I have the belief that, we do need to do some initial foundational training around biomechanical patterning.

Susi 00:25:58 And as the person grows their interoceptive or proprioceptive awareness, as they grow increased capacity I think about the fellow who had the kyphosis and the back pain then we can start to add more complexity in their movement pattern. So there's this trajectory. And a lot of people will kind of get comfortable with "oh, these exercises help me" but they don't kind of get to that next place. So then they're surprised when they're pain comes back and those exercises don't help them anymore. So we want to support someone again in growing that interoceptive and proprioceptive awareness so that they grow more inner resiliency. Alright so this then leads to this next piece, which is: how to start to see movement differently. And the reason why this is important is again, because of what happens in 200 and 500 hour teacher training, where the focus tends to be on "shapes" and on getting people into "shapes" and then, here are some modifications that you can do and the modifications really aren't about helping someone improve their function, they're about the class continuing to move along and not having to like, shout out to someone in a way of like having them stick out like a, like the lights shining on them. The spotlight's on them.

Susi 00:27:08 We want to help it be cohesive, inclusive and all those great things. I mean, that's part of what yoga enables. However, what then ends up happening is we lose, or the teacher is not specifically trained to actually see, movement patterns. So then how do we actually start seeing movement differently? So one of the things, when people finish my therapeutic yoga intensive, what I say to them, because they tend to learn a whole ton about movement and they're so, so surprised about how a lot of yoga poses, and the way that they've been taught through "alignment" and other techniques, have actually contributed to more compensation and more pain which is part of one of the reasons they're frustrated in taking the program what I say to them is: okay, when you go back to class, just observe. Don't correct immediately. Just allow yourself to see. Just see what's going on and trust what you're seeing. So often the yoga teachers that I work with are intuiting that they see something, right? Because they are. To me, intuition, when it comes to looking at body movement and teaching, is that we've already seen something.

Susi 00:28:20 We just can't name it specifically and we can't "consciously" see it but we've seen it because we are recognizing that there's something not quite right in that position. So it's like, step back and just hold on a second here. As you're moving, where are they... where are you noticing compensatory patterns? Where do they start? Where is the client or the student holding tension? Where are they collapsing? Where are they bracing? Where are they holding their breath? Where does the movement start to break down through the trajectory? And this will give you really, really good information, not necessarily to jump onto, but as you see this happen over a period of a couple of weeks, a few weeks, you'll start to see patterns. And in those patterns you'll be able to then cue and provide instruction that will be a lot more supportive but you're not kind of jumping in to try and fix anything. The other piece of it is to enable this idea of interoception and proprioception, and a way to start this process is to encourage people to explore sensation.

Susi 00:29:21 So one of those ways is when I'm teaching standing poses like tree pose or warrior, I first of all move my cueing to the joint that I'm asking them to move. So rather than in say, for tree pose, lifting your foot up or taking your feet wide as someone steps into warrior two, I actually cue from the hip and it says: all right, let's bring the like, we're going to move the leg bone up towards our belly as in to tree, or we're going to rotate the leg bone in the hip, and then we're going to bend the knee and raise the foot up to the inner leg or the inner thigh. With warrior two, it's like step the legs wide and I'm my hands are at the hip joint, so they're seeing me focus on that leg bone and hip joint. I'm also someone who will have my mini skeleton moving that leg bone in the socket. So they see where I'm specifically asking them to pay attention. So I'm initially cuing from this proprioceptive space.

Susi 00:30:15 Then it's like, okay, notice what you're feeling as you move. And because I work with a lot of people in pain, and the people who are following me have been in pain, or they're looking to move out of pain, it's like: can you move in a range that doesn't increase pain? Can you move in a range that doesn't increase tension? Can you find your "ease" range of motion? Which then leads to this idea of: can you use the nervous system as a guide? So instead of forcing an adjustment or alignment, continue the conversation around ease. So again, if we keep the conversation of: can you move in an ease range of motion? Or: can you do this movement with 15% less effort and still have the same range? Can you find this idea of softness as you move? What happens when you feel the three points in the bottom of your feet? And can you maintain a gentle focus as you take your body in towards tree and notice at what point that starts to fade? Not that it's bad, it's just notice where you start to fade and try not to grip around it.

Susi 00:31:19 Right? And those are all different ways... I wouldn't say all of that all at the same time, but those are all different ways to explore the way that we're instructing and cueing. All righty. So let's have a recap of what we chatted about today. And the first is: that traditional yoga alignment cues don't always serve movement function, and certainly not reducing and eliminating pain; and flexibility, strength, stability, mobility is not always the answer. Oftentimes there's coordinated patterns that need to be improved. We want to support movement variability for people. We want to support nervous system integration and downregulation. We want to support "effortless" effort. So consider, whether you're a PT or a massage therapist, even an OT, yoga teacher; observe your clients, your students, your patients in this scenario that you're in, whether it's in a studio or whether it's in a clinic, and instead of immediately doing adjustment, just really watch. Watch their movement. And this is what we do a ton of in the therapeutic yoga intensive is really training your eye to what you see.

Susi 00:32:27 So you're noticing patterns, you're noticing ways of movement and breath patterns and movement patterns and what's going on mechanically for sure. And if you want to deepen this experience, earlybird registration for the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive is still on this is being recorded in February and dropped in March of 2025 so if you're wanting to come to the April intensive, early bird registration is still on. I would love, love, love to have you in the program and really teach you how to do this. Whether you are a yoga teacher or a physical

therapist, massage therapist, or an OT. Did this episode really light you up? Do you want to help your folks have better outcomes, reduce pain more effectively and more quickly? Come and join me at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive, that's this April from the 26th through until May the 1st. It would be such an honour and a pleasure to show you what has worked so well for me for the past 30 years, and has helped so many of my trainees, now grads, build businesses that effectively help their clientele reduce and eradicate physical pain.

Susi 00:33:34 You can learn more over at functional synergy.com/intensive. Alright, you have a great, great week. Have a great rest of your day and we'll catch you next time.