Ep. #306 - Glutes: More Than Strength—Unlocking Safety, Stability, and Pain Relief

Full Episode Transcript

With your host:
Susi Hately

From Pain to Possibility with Susi Hately

Speaker 1 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 scream. And now here's your host, Susi Hately.

Speaker 2 00:00:22 Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here, because today we are talking about the glutes, specifically the power of the glutes, and probably not in a way that you've heard before. Most of the conversation when we think about the glutes is either about strength; like you need stronger glutes, activate your glutes, your pain is because your glutes aren't firing; or it's about glutes being lazy or "dead butt" syndrome. But what if... What if we are missing the bigger picture? What if your glutes aren't fully and totally and 100% about strength or power? What about safety? What if their function or dysfunction isn't just a muscular issue, but rather a nervous system response? By the end of today's episode, you're going to have perhaps a new perspective on your glutes, one that moves beyond isolated strength and into pain relief, adaptability, and stability.

Speaker 2 00:01:26 So we'll be talking about the glutes and the nervous system as well as are your glutes helping or hindering, and the deeper patterns behind glute compensation. So let's get rolling. Let's dig in. So let's begin with glutes and the nervous system and the notion of safety and stability. Let's start with the fundamental question. What is the primary job of your glutes? Now most people would say power and they're not wrong. I mean, heck, I'm leading a course called Power of the Glutes. The glutes are one of the most powerful muscle groups in our body. They help us run, jump, and move with force. But the glutes aren't just power generators. They're also stabilizers because they help distribute load through the body. They play a key role in hip and pelvis stability, and there's actually some cool research that shows how the lower aspect of the glute Maximus, when that's trained well, can lead to better outcomes post hip and knee surgery. But also, most importantly, they work in sync with our nervous system sense of safety, which is really where this all gets very interesting.

Speaker 2 00:02:41 When your body feels safe, your glutes function efficiently, and when your body doesn't feel safe, your glutes might shut down because a movement feels unsafe or they might overcompensate, leading to excessive tension and tightness, perhaps. This is where we can bring in the notion of DIMS and SIMS. And DIMS and SIMS both are acronyms that came out of the NOI Institute in Australia, where DIMS is "Danger In Me Signals" and SIMS is "Safety In Me Signals." Danger In Me Signals, as they relate to the glutes, can arise if you've had injury, surgery or chronic pain, or persistent issues of pain, and the nervous system might be protecting you by limiting glute function. If your body doesn't trust your movement patterns, your glutes might be under-activating or overworking in compensation. SIMS, or Safety In Me Signals, in the glutes can arise when the nervous system is perceiving stability and allows the muscles to work in harmony rather than in isolation. When we restore glute function through safety, we get efficiency rather than excessive effort. So this can be a completely different perspective from just "strengthen your glutes," because if you're strengthening glutes on top of a DIM, a "danger in me" pattern, you might not be connecting with them in the most effective way, which is when we're coming from a "safety in me" pattern.

Speaker 2 00:04:16 It can be so much more effective and the littlest bit of effort can lead to maximum results. So this leads us into: are your glutes helping or hindering? As I've sort of insinuated, is that there's an assumption in the movement world that more strength equals better function. But the reality is that strong doesn't always mean functional. So let's go through a few questions to check in with your own body. When you stand on one leg, do you feel stable? Is there a struggle to find balance? Now, granted, there are a few different components that make up balance that are more than the glutes or more than neuromuscular connection and coordination. And this is an interesting question to simply engage with. When you're walking or climbing stairs, do you happen to feel your glutes naturally engaging? Or do your quads and lower back seem to be doing all the work? How about when you are riding a bike? Where are you really powering from when you are taking that pedal stroke? And again, there's more to it than just the glutes.

Speaker 2 00:05:34 And is there a natural response to the initiation of that movement where you have your glutes connecting and engaging with the movement? How about this one: Do your hamstrings and/or your calf muscles always feel tight and limited no matter how much you stretch them? This becomes really interesting as a place to just question. None of these singular questions will point to glute or glute function, but when you start asking these three questions in light of other things you might know about your own glutes. They start to open up the curiosity to what's happening with your glutes and their function overall. The idea here is that the glutes can be offline or overworking in a way that's compensating for something else, particularly if you're climbing stairs or climbing an incline like going up a hill or you're hiking. How about your hamstrings or calves? Do they always feel tight no matter how much you stretch them? Now of course, this doesn't indicate a glute issue. It's a place to become exploratory about.

Speaker 2 00:06:53 The reality is when we're talking about walking, climbing stairs or your hamstrings, it could be that your glutes are offline or overworking in a way that's compensating for something else. Your body doesn't just recruit muscles randomly. It does what it perceives as the safest because our body responds to forces at play. So if your nervous system isn't fully trusting and specifically, and this might sound crazy, but if it doesn't fully trust your glutes, it might find another way to create stability. That's why some people have glutes that don't seem to fire at all, while others have glutes that are constantly tense and won't relax. Because in both of these scenarios, glutes that feel weak and glutes that feel too tight can also be a function of nervous system protection. So let's explore the deeper patterns underlying glute compensation. So if your glutes are too weak or too tight, let's consider what might be going on. In my work, in working with my clientele, there are a few compensation patterns that I often see. So, I often see some over-helping; so these are folks whose lower back or quadriceps or hamstrings do a lot of the work.

Speaker 2 00:08:10 So instead of the glutes initiating movement, these other muscles can take over, leading to a number of different results: anything from tightness, fatigue, pain, just that feeling of like "ick," like "ugh", kind of like "sound" feelings that don't necessarily have words. There's also the under-activators. So these might be people whose nervous systems have shut

down the glute function to protect against something, whether it's pain or instability or past injury. And it may be our nervous system saying, I don't trust this muscle to handle force, and I'm going to limit its activation. Now, there could be other sentences that are at play. This is just an example. There's also the bracers. So instead of using dynamic strength these people are gripping their glutes all the time, leading to a lot of chronic or persistent tightness and fatigue. And their body is mistaking tension for stability when in reality, true stability comes from adaptability and not gripping. If you recognize these ideas in yourself or your clientele, it's likely a sign that your glutes aren't actually the problem, and rather how your body is adapting to what it perceives as safe.

Speaker 2 00:09:39 So then, what can we do and how can we explore this further? So even as I've gone through this in the last section, I've talked more about like muscular and parts of the body like lower back, quads, hamstrings, shutting down glutes. Perhaps the way that the brain or the nervous system is saying if we were to humanize or personalize like things that the brain or the nervous system might be thinking, which isn't really what's happening, but we'll just consider that as a notion what I like to do is, I like to help improve neuromuscular coordination. Because if we think about three silos: the nervous system, muscular system, skeletal system; the nervous system is telling the muscular system how far and how fast to contract, which ultimately moves the skeletal system. So if we're going to improve how this dynamic plays out, we need to improve the communication between the nervous system and the muscular system. So in this case we get to improve the connection between the brain/nervous system and the glutes. Sometimes I find it not super effective to try and go to a muscle area that's either over-engaging or under-engaging and saying to it if I could again humanize the relationship stop doing that or start doing that.

Speaker 2 00:11:00 That tends not to be the way in, because I'm looking at a result of a connection and I need to focus in on the connection, not the result of the connection. If I improve the connection, the result will change. So instead of working at the muscle space directly, I work between the skeleton and the brain. So in this case, I'm looking at how the femur connects into the pelvis, how the pelvis connects to the spine, and how the pelvis connects to the ribcage, and ultimately how all these pieces work together: the ribcage, spine, pelvis, leg bone. And the reason why is because the leg bone is moving in the pelvis or the pelvis is moving relative to the leg bone when the glutes are engaging, right? Because the glutes, in part, are an extender/extensor, a abductor/rotator depending on the fibers and the fiber orientation. It's a connection between that femur, that thigh bone, and the pelvis. So if there's compensation, what we'll often find is that even if that leg bone is moving, we'll also see the pelvis moving and that pelvis is moving relative to the spine or the ribcage.

Speaker 2 00:12:06 And if it's not the movement that's intended, that's the compensation that's arising. And I see this all the time! And probably the most common place I see this, I'll give you two examples, is doing the movement of bridge pose in yoga and also the ankle to knee. I think it's also sometimes called threading the needle, which we find in a lot of different practices, whether it's yoga, Pilates or fitness. And that's when you're lying on your back, your knees are bent and you lift one leg off the floor and place the ankle onto the knee. Now the movement, if

we start with the latter, we start with ankle to knee; that movement is meant to be the leg bone moving in the socket, the femur moving in that hip socket rotating, and the ankle comes on to the opposite knee. But so often what we see is the pelvis moving along with it. So we see more movement between the pelvis and the ribcage, not the leg bone and the pelvis. Now, I've talked about this a lot on my Facebook page, and I will have a link in the show notes for you to actually see what I'm speaking about in relationship to this.

Speaker 2 00:13:11 But the point here is that the intention is to connect with the movement of the leg, the pelvis. What we're doing instead is moving the pelvis to the ribcage. So we're actually connecting with a different segmental relationship. We're missing the connection between the brain and the body. So if we can simply improve the connection between the brain and the body, we start making gains. Which then leads to bridge pose, because bridge really is a very clear glute exercise. But what ends up often happening when people do this position, especially when they're coming out of a rehab program or coming into a rehab program, is they're often being told to squeeze the glutes first and then lift. But let's just think about it. If they're squeezing the glutes first and then lifting, then how are the glutes going to engage further if they've already squeezed all the way? How are we going to actually get that angle into extension to lift into bridge pose? And that's often when we start to use other areas of the body instead of the glutes specifically.

Speaker 2 00:14:10 So a lot of times, and I've said this a bunch on this podcast, where a lot of times what I'll do with my clientele is say, you know, let's not squeeze the glutes first. Let's just lift into extension. And can you feel your glutes responding to you, just simply connecting with that movement? So when we think about the skeleton moving, our brain asking the skeleton to move, do the muscles then respond and actually lift into the movement pattern? And this is what starts to become really interesting. And with time and perhaps a little bit of other stimulus and different exercises and different techniques and little tricks that I've got up my sleeve to help their brain and their body meet and greet and engage properly and in a coordinated, smooth and efficient way those glutes will start to fire properly. But again, not because I've said "glutes, strengthen glutes, do something, I gotta wake up my glutes." But rather no, let's make the overall coordinated patterns work better, because when we work at a motor control and coordination space, at the depth of what actually creates biomechanical patterning, and we get that cleared up, then we move and then we add strength.

Speaker 2 00:15:19 Now we've got something sustainable happening. Now we can build into more stability. Now we can build into power. And all the way through. We've done this in a very step-by-step, very aware, connected, optimistic, easeful way. Safety is often inherent. And that's when people feel stronger, standing taller, more grounded, more in their body. And we as the teacher, see them more in their legs, more present and almost more lit up. And that is the power that comes from better trained glutes, a better body brain connection, one that's inherently safe because that is what leads to sustainable strength. If this is interesting to you and you want to dig in further, I am leading the Power of the Glutes program on Monday, March 24th between 1 and 3 pm and if you are listening to this episode after March the 24th, this program is on demand so you can access it over at functionalsynergy.com/glutes. And if you want to take this

further, if you want to become someone who's just really, really good at being able to help your clientele reduce and eradicate pain and learning in this way around how to connect brain and body in an effective, efficient way, you'll want to check out the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive and my Yoga Therapy Certification program.

Speaker 2 00:16:49 And that's where you really get good at this process. And you can learn more on all of that at functionalsynergy.com and just look up the intensive and certification. All the details are there. Looking forward to seeing you next time. Take good care. Bye bye.