

## Ep. #314 - Teaching Yoga for Osteoporosis



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With your host:  
Susi Hatelly

[From Pain to Possibility](#) with Susi Hatelly

Introduction 00:00:01 You're listening to from pain to Possibility with Susi Hatelly. 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 Hatelly.

Susi 00:00:24 Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here, because today is part two in our series of yoga and osteoporosis. In the last episode, we explored the sensory motor loop and how yoga can really help people reconnect with their bodies after an osteoporosis diagnosis. Today, we're going deeper into what it means to teach yoga to students with osteoporosis, because yoga can provide so much for folks with osteoporosis. And we're seeing more and more with the science that bone health is more than just bone density, that the bone fragility metrics are just as vital. And we're seeing that yoga can be helpful in improving those metrics as well. But it means that we need to teach in a slightly different way. It's not about getting into the pose; rather, it's more about helping students reclaim trust in their bodies one small, grounded step at a time.

Susi 00:01:16 And it's that process of how we're doing that teaching that makes all the difference in the world. And it might sound simple the way I've put it, but it's also really significant. Like, think about it. Someone's been given a really scary diagnosis that often leads to a disconnection, a disembodiment. Plus, they've been told to be careful, don't fall, and avoid twisting or forward bending. And yet, what do we see out in the world? We have twisting and forward bending. And we don't "plan" falls, right? Step off curbs, there's ice, all the things. So you can see and kind of get a sense that this creates a real atmosphere of caution and fear, which can lead people to tighten, brace and in some cases really withdraw in a big, big, big way. And so what I'm hoping with this series, this two-part series and with my Yoga and Osteoporosis Program and Yoga and Osteoporosis Video Guidebook, that this provides a different stepwise approach, one rooted in incremental movement, deep listening and nervous system safety.

Susi 00:02:20 So this episode is really for teachers who want to meet their students where they are, to help them build confidence and to teach from a place of presence and not pressure. So whether you've had students ask "can I do yoga with osteoporosis?" or you're looking to shift away from a cue-heavy or alignment-heavy style to something more intuitive, this episode will be for you. I'll also be talking about how you can support your students without overwhelming them, because the truth is when the nervous system feels overwhelmed, learning shuts down. And when we can create safety, possibility opens up. I also want to mention that if you're new to this podcast or new to this series, I recommend listening to the previous episode. Yoga and osteoporosis. Rewiring the body's GPS. It really sets a strong foundation for what we're exploring today. So let's get rolling. I think a big piece that we need to address is that in a lot of 200-hour teacher training programs, the focus is on the pose. The focus is on alignment, it's on shape and its form.

Susi 00:03:39 They're taught to guide people into poses and to correct them when they don't feel right. And that way of teaching can often not be helpful for someone with osteoporosis, right? Because if someone is trying to conform to a pose, they might end up bracing or gripping.

They might hold their breath to try and get something right. Or they might not want to be a bad student. But in the process of that, they're creating more compensation by focusing on the external shape rather than an internal experience. There's a "missing out" on the opportunity to really grow an inner sense of confidence and of balance, which is so fundamental in helping someone to improve. Someone who's got osteoporosis, never mind other conditions and other scenarios. But really and truly, it's important and necessary and significant for people with osteoporosis. So then what do we do instead? A big piece is to focus in on what "feeling safe" means in movement and connecting breath with motion. To explore smaller movements or incremental shifts with curiosity and inviting autonomy rather than enforcing alignment.

Susi 00:04:59 We can start letting go of the need to fix a pose and really support students to become more and more aware of their experience. That's not only where agency is built, but it's also where healing begins. A really simple example of this is a student with osteoporosis said to me: I didn't even realize that I was clenching my jaw the entire time, and when you asked me to check in with my breath, I felt something shift. The shift didn't happen because of the movement or the pose that we were doing. It happened because of presence and cultivating that state of presence. If you've been listening to this podcast for any length of time, or if you have followed me anywhere within my social or taken any of my courses, you know that I love smaller movement and really looking at how joints move. I am the first person who will express my entire love for the practice of yoga. The reality is, though, is that there are a lot of people who cannot do the complex, complicated movements that exist within the practice of yoga.

Susi 00:06:15 There are a lot of different things going on at the same time, and it's ripe for compensation. It's a big reason why injuries occur in the practice. When it comes to someone with osteoporosis, the practice and the complexity of it can be fabulous and we've got to move slowly into it. We've got to understand how to break the poses down into component parts, give students a time to feel what's happening as it's happening, and make space for inquiry rather than performance. So when we do that, we then incrementally build towards the actual position or the movement, the complexity that it offers. And again, that complexity is great because it helps train agility and nimbleness. Two factors that are essential for if someone is about to fall, to come back to standing. Like they can catch themselves when they slip, or when they sprain their ankle, or they step off a curb in a funny way. It's also really important just for day to day balance and strength. So as an example, what I might do if I'm thinking about a tree pose for someone is:

Susi 00:07:26 I've broken, in my mind I've broken down that pose into the small component parts. And what's actually needed to do tree pose? Well, what we know for sure is that we need to lift one leg off the ground, there's hip flexion involved. There's also hip rotation involved; that leg bone, that free leg bone, that femur, needs to rotate in that hip socket. And then the free foot gets to lean up against the inner standing leg, whether it's at the shin or further up the thigh. So rather than just saying get into tree pose and lift a foot off the ground, there's a focus instead on: what's actually required to make that happen? Does someone have the ability to lift their leg off the ground? Does someone have the ability to rotate the leg bone in the socket? And if they don't have the capacity or the ability, then what is needed to support them? Do they need to do

this with a hand on a chair or on the wall? Incrementally helping them grow their awareness of how their leg bone is moving.

Susi 00:08:33 How their balance is shifting, where they are in space. We're building neuromuscular control and coordination at its fundamental level. And this helps the nervous system track safety. It helps the student stay present with movement rather than disassociating from it or bracing through it. And when this safety is present, new possibilities emerge. Like, things start to change in front of our eyes. And it may be that we see a deeper exhale or a subtle release of tension. We also start to see someone standing taller, because now the tissue that's meant to be doing the work is doing the work, and the compensatory tissue that had been maybe trying to do the work no longer is needed. So people are standing taller. They're feeling more ease because they're not utilizing the grip and tension that they were using before. Bottom line is that when someone feels safe, their body will truly reveal what it's capable of and all that capacity is there in us. So often there's just layers of tension that are over top of it. As a result, as they see what they're capable of, they discover their range not just physically but also emotionally, which makes a lot of this process super, super powerful.

Susi 00:09:56 This leads me into a very obvious next step of interoception and proprioception. I've spoken about interoception and proprioception in other episodes in this podcast. So it's clear and we know that they're not just buzzwords, that they're central to how we move, how we feel and how we learn. So interoception, typically, if you were to do a Google search, interoception is sensing what's going on inside your body and typically the reference is about heart racing or hunger or thirst, holding the breath. I find that it's also just what we are generally sensing in our tissue as we move, and this is different from proprioception with what I'm going to talk about next. It's: can we feel a grip? Can we feel ease? Can we feel fluidity or whatever other words land for someone in terms of what their tissue is feeling? Proprioception is your ability to sense where your body is in space. So, for example, if your eyes were closed and you're bringing your arm overhead, you could know where that arm is in space. And this is a big piece to how we balance. Both interoception and proprioception are necessary.

Susi 00:11:12 And both can be deeply impacted by trauma, fear, pain, and stress. In osteoporosis, it's really common for students to have dulled proprioception and muted interoception. They might feel unsure of where they are in space or disconnected from their bodies entirely. So as yoga teachers. Part of our job, as I see it, is to help reawaken these systems. And it's not so much about asking what I think are banal questions. Although there is some validity to these, I just don't find them the most effective ones. But I hear a lot of teachers using them, which is can you feel the weight in your feet? What happens to your breath when you move your arms? Where do you feel your movement originate from? And like I said, they're not awful questions. I just find them somewhat banal. I'm specifically teaching, when I'm talking about re-awakening these systems, I'm specifically teaching them about their movement, about their compensation patterns that is supported and focused on improving these patterns. Because when you can become aware of that which you aren't aware of, because typically compensatory patterns are usually in that realm of what we're not aware of but when we can draw our awareness to them now, we can tune into:

Susi 00:12:31 What are we interoceptively tuning into? What are we proprioceptively tuning into? What is working and what's not working in the movement? Where are we moving? Where are we not moving? So if we're holding our breath when we're meant to be moving our leg bone, we're likely not going to be as interoceptively or proprioceptively clued in to that leg bone. But then we can actually start to go, okay, hold on a second. Where is this leg bone in space? Can we just move that leg bone? And typically what I've found with students is now we actually see how the leg bone's actually moving, which is a lot smaller movement than they anticipated because they've been using a bracing pattern or moving their pelvis, or using their shoulders or their jaw to brace, and they thought they were moving their leg bone in their socket, but they weren't. So by focusing in on growing this awareness in a very specific, deliberate way, a student becomes aware of something they hadn't noticed before.

Susi 00:13:33 And then there is a reconnection. A lot of times it can be subtle, but what they start to notice is when they move better. As I've mentioned earlier, they stand taller, they feel clearer, lighter, younger. When somebody feels more, they've got more choice. And that choice is the seed of empowerment. Let's move from fear to possibility. Because that's the emotion: fear, which is often sitting quietly in a room when a student with osteoporosis walks in. And it makes sense. When somebody hears the word "osteoporosis," it often comes with phrases like: you're at risk for fracture. Be careful. Don't bend forward. Avoid twisting. And while this kind of messaging, though well-intentioned, often leads people to move from a place of protection rather than presence, their nervous system has interpreted almost every movement as potentially dangerous. And when that happens, movement often becomes smaller, breath becomes more shallow, and curiosity shrinks. So our job then, as teachers is to not ignore the fear, but to meet it with compassion and gradually create the conditions for safety.

Susi 00:15:09 So this internal state that was feeling more dangerous starts to shift. And it's not just about supporting the spine without bracing, it's helping to reconnect to a sense of wholeness. I can come back to the notion of incremental movement and reducing compensation pattern, and how that ties into their proprioceptive and interoceptive awareness. When they have a change of what they can feel, when they feel more grounded and more connected, there's a growing sense of wholeness, of capability, and it's not uncommon for you to hear from a student: "This is the first time I've felt like I wasn't broken." Here is language that you might use, and it shifts from a fear-based cueing to a possibility-based presence. Can you do the same movement and get the same result with 10 to 15% less effort? What happens when you continue to breathe and only move in the range where breath is present? So let me break down those two kinds of cueing for you. The first one is can you do the same movement with the same result with 10%, 10 to 15% less effort? So I'm asking them to use less effort, but I still want them to have the same result because anybody can use less effort, but using less effort and have the same result?

Susi 00:16:54 Now that's a challenge that's worthy. So now it's finding and feeling for what that is and tuning into the movement pattern all at the same time. Same thing with the second idea I provided. Breathing and only moving in the range where breath is present. Again, we're focusing

in and tuning in, both interoceptively and proprioceptively, we're growing that capacity. And they invite a sense of curiosity, softness, safety, and self-trust. And from my experience, this is where real transformation begins. So let's ground all of this in a real world teaching experience. Here are some strategies that you can start to use right away. So let's first consider that in every class you can help establish a connection with the floor. So if you're standing through the feet, for example. Feeling the feet, the three points of the feet on the floor. Feeling where the toes are, feeling the space between the toes. Feeling the heel, the outer side, the inner edge, the tips of the toes. And where the pelvis is in relationship and the whole back of the body.

Susi 00:18:18 Maybe it's that they're on their back and they can feel the whole back on the floor, feeling the support of the floor against their body. And tuning in to that support. Because oftentimes, and you'll see this if the cueing and the language and the movement makes sense for them, you'll see the result of a nervous system settling. You'll see it in their skin, you'll see it in their breath. The second idea is to teach one thing at a time. We don't want to overload their nervous system. We don't want to overload their thinking patterns. Too many cues reduces embodiment. So maybe it's focusing on the breath. Maybe it's focusing on moving a leg bone in the socket. Maybe the theme of the class is a leg bone in the socket. Easy movement. And that's where we start. Invite exploration versus performance. Encourage students to notice, to feel and adapt. How might this be easier and still have the same result? Speak to their system. Remember, you're not cueing for muscles or for shapes.

Susi 00:19:40 You're cueing for the nervous system and connection and embodiment. Your words matter and they can build tension or melt it. Each of these ideas are helping to facilitate a classroom where students don't just follow instructions, but rather they're developing discernment. The instructions allow for curiosity, presence, connection and that is what stays with them long after the class ends. So as I bring this episode to a close, the key piece here is even though osteoporosis is a bone health condition. This is not just about bones, it's about relationship. It's about supporting the nervous system and neuromuscular control and coordination. It's about helping students to feel what's already working. When someone starts to feel safe again in their own body, the door really starts to open up. And not just for movement, but for possibility. And as teachers, we get to offer that. Not prescriptions, obviously, but presence. Not pressure, but permission. When we can help someone understand movement patterns, their movement patterns, and provide them opportunities to shift them, so much can change.

Susi 00:21:06 And this is what we get into in both the Yoga and Osteoporosis Program and the Yoga and Osteoporosis Video Guidebook. If you get the Yoga and Osteoporosis Program, you get the guidebook with it. And the video guidebook is a standalone first-step process for you to really improve your teaching, to support your clientele who has osteoporosis. And you can access it over at [functionalsynergy.com/bonehealth](https://functionalsynergy.com/bonehealth). Thank you for being here. Thank you for doing this work. And thank you for meeting your students with the same care and curiosity you offer yourself. We'll see you next time. Take care.