Ep. #323 - Knee Health Reimagined: Why Movement Quality Matters More Than Muscle Strength

Full Episode Transcript

With your host:
Susi Hately

From Pain to Possibility with Susi Hately

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

Susi 00:00:22 Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here today, because today we're talking about knee health. One of the most common concerns I hear from yoga teachers is about working with students who have knee pain. There's a hesitation, a worry. Am I doing the right thing? Am I going to make things worse? Should I just avoid those poses? And often what follows is either avoidance steering clear of anything that could trigger the knee or hyper correcting alignment without really understanding the forces at play. So today I want to invite you to reimagine the knee not as a fragile structure, not as a ticking time bomb but as one of the most remarkable joints in the body. A joint designed for strength, for movement and capable of recovery even after injury, pain or years of compensations.

Susi 00:01:17 And in understanding the need differently, you'll also start to see what it really means to teach movement that heals rather than just movement that moves. So this is the beginning of a different conversation, one that leads us beyond yoga poses and into real, embodied understanding. Let's start by zooming out. Most people, including many yoga teachers, think of the knee in isolation. They think if my student's knee hurts, it must be a problem with the knee itself. But here's the reality: the knee is almost never the root of the issue. It's the messenger. It's where poor load distribution gets expressed. It's where compensation patterns above and below eventually converge. And often by the time the knee starts talking, it's been if I could personify it carrying someone else's load for quite a while. Think of it like this: if your hip isn't stabilizing properly, if your foot isn't absorbing and transmitting ground force effectively, if your pelvis and ribcage aren't organized for efficient load transfer, the knee is the one caught in the middle trying to reconcile all of it.

Susi 00:02:38 And unlike some other joints, the knee doesn't have much room for error. It's a hinge joint, after all, primarily built for flexion and extension, but it doesn't operate in a vacuum. It sits inside a 3D body, so while it might move in one primary plane, the sagittal plane, it absorbs forces from every other plane. Lateral torque from the unstable hips, for example. Rotational pull from an ankle or foot. Bracing patterns from the pelvis, core and even the jaw. The knee, in a sense, becomes a scapegoat not because it's fragile, but because it's the one, the last one sometimes standing when other systems are faltering. So when we say knee pain, perhaps we need to pause and ask what else is trying to stabilize or over stabilize in the body? What other structures have handed off their job to the knee? Here's the thing: the knee isn't inherently weak. It is highly adaptable. It's designed to transmit load, not to bear it alone. So when it becomes painful, inflamed or stiff, the question isn't what's wrong with this knee? The real question is what forces aren't being handled well above and below.

Susi 00:04:00 Your job as a movement teacher or therapist isn't to hyperfocus on the knee, poking at it, mobilizing it endlessly, or cueing it into alignment with no upstream or downstream context. Your job is to understand the environment that the knee lives in, and to shift that

environment so the knee doesn't have to over function anymore. It's the essence of functional movement and therapeutic teaching. It's not simply strengthen the quads or stretch the hamstrings that's very rarely where I start with people's knees but rather it's understanding how the entire kinetic chain interacts and how the knee becomes symptomatic when that chain is disrupted. So let's ground this into something practical, and we'll begin by observing the foot. How does it land? How does it absorb during a walking pattern or transition from warrior one to warrior two. Do you see gripping toes? A collapsed arch? An overly rigid foot trying to brace against instability elsewhere? That foot pattern is sending information and pressure right up to the knee. So now let's move to the hip. When your student balances on one leg, do they sink into one side? Does their pelvis tip forward, backward or sideways? What about from a muscular lens? Is their glute-med firing? Or what about the TFL? Is it doing the job? These are subtle but game changing patterns.

Susi 00:05:33 When the hip doesn't stabilize effectively, the knee tries to make up the difference, but it doesn't rotate much at all and it doesn't want to shear, so the joint has the opportunity to wear out faster. Now let's come into the breath. Why the breath? Because the breath is a nervous system signal. When someone is bracing, holding their breath, or breathing shallowly, the body is preparing to defend or freeze, amongst other patterns. The diaphragm might become less functional, the ribcage might lock down, and that lack of fluid pressure response can travel down yes, to the knee. We rarely think of the relationship between diaphragm mechanics and knee pain, but yet I've seen the breath relationship to knee, to bracing patterns through the ribcage and the knee, over and over and over again. When a client comes in with knee pain, we bring awareness to the hip and the movement of the leg bone in the pelvis. We explore that relationship to foot patterning. And yes, we're integrating breath, sometimes with simple movement, but sometimes just to notice what the breath is doing.

Susi 00:06:48 As we do, as we bring awareness to these things, suddenly the compensations start to dissolve because when the system feels safe, it stops over stabilizing. And when the system stops over stabilizing, the knee finally gets to do what it was built for: transmit force, not absorb all of it. That's the shift. It's not about fixing the knee. It's about restoring clarity and communication through the whole kinetic chain so the knee no longer has to scream just to be heard. Consider then, as you cue your students, teach your classes, adapt for pain or injury, remember: the knee is not the problem, it's the signal. And once you learn to interpret that signal, not just through muscles but through movement quality, you'll start seeing things that no one else sees. And more importantly, your students will start feeling things they didn't know were possible. So as we carry on, let's talk about one of the most pervasive myths in both fitness and yoga worlds: that you need to strengthen your quads to fix your knees.

Susi 00:08:00 Now, I'm not here to say strength isn't important. Not at all. Of course it is. But strength on its own, without timing, coordinated recruitment and of course, without mobility, it's like building a house with bricks and no mortar. It looks solid until pressure hits and then things begin to crack. So let's look at this a little differently. Rather than asking "is this student strong enough?" consider "is this student moving well enough, coordinated enough for their strength to be useful?" Because you can have very strong muscles and still move in a dysfunctional

compensatory way. You can build up your quadriceps to be super powerful, but if your foot is collapsing with every step, or your pelvis isn't stabilizing through the transverse plane, all that strength doesn't translate into healthy movement. It becomes brute force, compression. It becomes the kind of strength that masks dysfunction until the knee finally says, I'm out. So now let's flip it. Mobility without strength is also a problem. We've all seen it. The student who's super bendy in a forward fold but can't stabilize in a step up, or the one whose warrior two looks deep and impressive, but whose front knee wobbles the moment they transition out.

Susi 00:09:23 Mobility alone does not equal resilience. Mobility alone doesn't prevent compensation because if your tissues have range but no control, your nervous system has no choice but to brace. The system gets overwhelmed and the knee is often the first to show it. So what's the answer? It's bringing these two ideas together: mobility and strength. But not just in isolation; we're not checking off two separate boxes. What I'm talking about is coordinated movement quality. Movement quality. This is where things shift. When you start to pay attention to how force travels through the body, how the joints are stacking under load, how breath integrates with movement, how timing and sequencing affect control; you're no longer just building strength or improving flexibility, you're teaching the body to function well. You're supporting the nervous system to feel safe in motion. You're helping the system reorganize from grip and compensation to flow and responsiveness. So let's make this practical. When you've got a student who is moving into lunge, take a look. Are they having access to both a push off and the sinking down? Other words, can they decelerate and re accelerate with ease? Also look at the quality.

Susi 00:10:55 Is their movement jerky, tentative or overly muscular? Consider warrior three. Can they organize their pelvis over a stable femur? Are they clenching their glutes or locking their standing leg, even hyper extending their knee to stay upright? These are all subtleties that tell you whether mobility and strength are actually working together, or whether they're, in some cases, fighting each other. When movement quality is high, strength and mobility become one thing, not separate components. They're co-regulated expressions of healthy force transmission. Now let's bring this into a real world scenario. I had a client come to see me post ACL repair. She had been graduated from physio. She was cleared to return to sport. She was doing squats and lunges and could pass all the standard strength tests. But she didn't trust her knee. And every time she tried to go downstairs or do a single leg step down, she felt a twinge. The issue wasn't strength. She had it. The issue was load distribution. Timing, force clarity. So we stripped things down and began to look at biomechanical granularity, how that leg bone moved in her pelvis, how that pelvis moved relative to her leg bone, her pelvis and her ribcage, and then started to track downward toward her foot mechanics.

Susi 00:12:25 We also noticed where her breath got held. We didn't need to talk to her about how she was thinking about her movement pattern. We worked with her mechanics, her connection, her coordination. And within one session she was more confident. And within four, her stairs were pain free. Not because she magically got stronger in a short period of time, but because her system finally understood the pathway. You see, strength on its own didn't solve the issue. It was *quality* that changed everything. And this is where yoga teachers have a

massive opportunity. You're not limited to load patterning, in some cases, like many personal trainers are. And no, I'm not knocking personal trainers. As a yoga teacher though, and for the personal trainers who have integrated yoga aspects into their training, they'll get this. As yoga teachers, you have access to breath, tempo, stability cues that go far beyond external weight. You can teach students how to feel when their pelvis is bracing, their ribcage is gripping. You can help them to organize this connection between their ribs and their pelvis.

Susi 00:13:47 And when that happens and there is a stability without grip, interestingly, quads and glutes fire without gripping. The point here is that we can train strength through responsiveness, not force. This is nervous system informed movement and, in my mind, real kinesiology. We're helping to build from someone who had been in recovery, rehabilitation and moving them towards strength that's useful in a very, very, very, very coordinated way, enabling the building of agility and nimbleness, too. You see, this is the shift that really turns knee pain from a chronic issue into a solvable puzzle. So the next time you're cueing or your pose or leading a student through a transition, don't just ask, is this strong? Consider the questions of: is this integrated? Is the load being shared? Is breath supporting this action? Is the system working with itself or against itself? Because that's what determines whether strength helps or hides the real issue. Here's something that can surprise a lot of yoga teachers and even some movement professionals: it's not usually a massive intervention that changes knee pain.

Susi 00:15:08 In fact, big changes often don't come from big moves. They come from subtle, nearly invisible shifts in how the body organizes itself. Minute recalibrations that ripple through the kinetic chain in profound ways. This is where a movement truly becomes therapeutic, because when a student learns to make these small refinements, when they begin to feel them instead of force them, the nervous system finally gets the message it's been waiting for. You're safe. You don't need to grip anymore. Let me give you some concrete examples. Sometimes the biggest difference in knee pain comes from teaching someone how to land through their whole foot. How to feel the center of their heel, the ball of the foot, the base of the pinky toe, and sense the moment the breath locks instead of letting it flow. These might sound like tiny details, but here's what's really happening underneath: each of these refinements shapes how load transfers and travels through the body. Each one prevents unnecessary stress from accumulating at the knee, and each one helps your student move from surviving their pose into truly inhabiting it.

Susi 00:16:18 Here's a real world story. A student of mine came in with chronic medial knee pain, and she'd been told by her physio to strengthen her glutes and avoid deep bends. And while that worked, she was still getting stuck doing basic yoga transitions without bracing. So we slowed things down, way, way, way down. And we just looked at how her biomechanical granular movement worked; again, what was going on between the leg bone and the pelvis; the pelvis and the ribs; how the leg bones swung in the pelvis and impacted how the foot struck the ground; what was going on through that inner leg line; and again, what the breath did as she loaded through her leg. And we noticed something that every time she stepped into warrior one on the right, she gripped her jaw, held her breath, and leaned forward slightly. It was a micro movement. To some, barely visible. But that forward lean shifted the force down through to the

medial knee. And that bracing? Some could say that it was her system saying, hey, this doesn't feel safe.

Susi 00:17:23 So we made one slight change. We added a small pause at the top of the transition, just to give her a chance to exhale, to feel the ground and to sense where her ribcage was relative to her pelvis before she descended down into the position. Within a few repetitions which was less than five minutes the pain eased, not because we fixed the knee but because we restored clarity to the system. That's the power of small. It's not just about the foot or the pelvis. It's also about timing. When the hip stabilizes just a fraction of a second earlier, the knee doesn't have to lock. When the diaphragm stays mobile during effort, the nervous system doesn't need to brace. When the ribcage isn't frozen in anticipation of load, the lower limbs can move more freely. This is the nuance that most trainings miss. They're looking for alignment or proper technique. And those things, while they do matter, what matters more in my books is: when does the support arrive? Is it responsive or reactive? Is the body preparing for movement or protecting against it? These questions lead you into the real world of movement quality, where subtle, skilled adjustments bring the biggest shifts in pain, ease and function.

Susi 00:18:46 Here's something I really want you to hear. You don't have to change your entire teaching style to make this shift. You don't need to scrap your favourite sequences or reinvent your practice. You simply need to see differently, to slow down enough to notice when the body organizes well and when it doesn't, and look for compensatory signals like breath holding; excess tension in the hands, jaws, or eyes; a pelvis that wobbles unpredictably; a foot, perhaps, that always rolls in or out. These are potential breadcrumbs that lead you back to something closer to the issue, which oftentimes isn't the knee at all. And once you learn how to follow these breadcrumbs, you become the kind of teacher who creates real change, not by giving perfect instructions, but by guiding your students into better internal relationships with gravity, breath, and ground. That's what makes this work so beautiful. You're not handing over solutions from the outside. You're facilitating awareness from the inside out. And with that awareness, the body starts to self-correct. Not because you said the right cue, but because the system received a better option and chose it.

Susi 00:20:00 One small change. One better pathway. One moment of nervous system safety. That's how big shifts happen. The next time your student says I feel stuck or my knee always hurts in this pose, resist the urge to throw new instructions at them. Instead, slow down. Look upstream. Watch how they prepare, how they move into it. How their breath responds. And then offer one small point of awareness. Because when when that small thing lands, it changes everything else. So let's bring this all together. Knee pain isn't random. It's not inevitable. And it's almost never about the knee alone. It's a signal, a request for change from a system that's been overcompensating for too long. When you start seeing the knee as a part of a larger conversation between the foot, the hip, the breath, the nervous system, everything changes. You stop chasing symptoms. You stop over cueing alignment, and you start supporting real healing. And the best part? You don't have to throw out your yoga toolkit.

Susi 00:21:11 You just need to layer a deeper understanding of movement, load, breath, and timing. And that's what we do inside of I Love Kinesiology. We teach you how to see what's really going on. How to teach in a way that helps your students get out of pain and stay there. If today's episode has sparked something inside of you a curiosity, a felt body "yes," a sense that there's more to explore I'd love for you to join us because when you see differently, you teach differently. And when you teach differently, your students begin to heal in ways they never thought possible. That's the work. And you're ready for it. For more, check out functionalsynergy.com/ilk. We'll see you next time. Hey there, thanks for joining me with this episode. If you are ready to stop guessing and start seeing, join us inside I Love Kinesiology. You'll learn to teach with clarity, guide with confidence, and finally understand what your students movement is really saying. You can check it out at functionalsynergy.com/ilk.