

## Ep. #324 - Pain Isn't Always the Problem: Compensation Patterns You Might Be Missing



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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 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 00:00:27 Welcome and welcome back. I am so glad that you're here today, because we're going to dig into pain being an invitation; and that pain isn't wrong, it's not the villain; and digging into and really opening up into this idea of what pain and what compensation can really open up for us in terms of helping our recovery and healing process and really helping us move from pain to possibility. So let's begin with something really, really simple and perhaps obvious, given what I've just said in terms of introducing this episode. Pain gets blamed for an awful lot. And most of us, whether we're yoga teachers, movement professionals, or people, human beings living in our bodies, have been taught to fear pain, to fix it, to push through it, to avoid it altogether.

Susi 00:01:13 But as I've mentioned, what if pain isn't the problem? What if the pain that many are trying to chase, erase, or outmaneuver is actually the signal that points us to the real opportunity? Not an alarm, an invitation. And that's where this episode begins. Pain isn't always the problem. Compensation commonly is when we're looking at helping to reduce and eliminate physical pain. And when you're trained to really see where that compensation pattern is and not from an alignment perspective, not through trying to improve alignment and become an alignment enforcer but rather through the lens of biomechanics and nervous system behaviour you really start to notice that the body is incredibly clever at finding a way to make things happen, even if the ideal pathways aren't available. That's what a compensation pattern really is. It's the body saying, I've got this. Even when it's doing something inefficient, unsustainable, or just not quite integrated. It's like trying to drive a car with one tire deflated. You can still get from A to B, but the longer you go, the more strain you put on everything else.

Susi 00:02:39 In I Love Kinesiology, one of the first things that I teach is that that pain, as an analogy, is like the scream in a long line of whispers that have gone unnoticed, which makes a lot of sense, right? Because you can't really hear whispers. And so when we only focus on the pain, then we're really missing the deeper conversation that exists. Let's look at an example and consider shoulder pain. Persistent, consistent, chronic, long time shoulder pain. That pain might not be because that something is wrong with the shoulder itself; it might be that the scapula or the shoulder blade isn't moving well on the ribcage, or that the breath is restricted, or that the hand doesn't have full contact with the ground in downward facing dog and the load doesn't distribute properly, or maybe all of these things combined, and not even those in isolation, but there might be other things further downstream. So while the shoulder is taking the hit, it's not because there's something wrong or broken, but rather it's what's compensating.

Susi 00:03:55 It's the pattern. And once we begin to see the patterns as the yoga teachers and then as the student feeling those patterns, the game really does change. You go from guessing what's wrong to tracing what's happening. And here's a really interesting twist: sometimes the strongest looking movement is the most compensated. You see someone doing a plank and

they're solid, not sagging, lots of effort. And behind that strength is maybe a jaw that's clenched or a diaphragm that's not moving, or a core that's braced instead of being responsive. So is that movement strong then? Well, technically, sure, but functionally it's not really that sustainable, is it? Or integrated. And over time it's not really that strong. So we'll get into this more in the next segment but for now here's what I want to leave you with: pain is your body's request for a new strategy. It's not a punishment. It's not a sign you're broken. It's a doorway. A message that something, somewhere is working for something else that's not showing up.

Susi 00:05:07 So the work isn't to silence it. It's to listen. To trace it back and learn to move in a way that brings the whole system back online. So coming into this next segment, I'm calling it The Mask of Strong, where in the last segment, I'm hoping to reframe that pain is not the enemy, but rather it's information and a signal, a message that something isn't working with the system, but rather for it. And often what pain reveals is compensation. In this segment, we're going to take this one step further, because sometimes the patterns that lead to pain don't look like breakdown, they actually look like strength. So let's take the example of plank since it's familiar and it's widely taught and you've probably seen it or done it yourself. You know, spine is straight, glutes are on, core engaged, looks super solid. And yet you've got a client or a student or even you where your wrists or their wrists ache. The breath is shallow or held. The neck is tense. So what's happening? One thing I like to ask is this: what part of this strength is real and what part is compensatory? Because as it turns out, not all strength is created equal.

Susi 00:06:33 Compensation is the body's brilliant way of getting something done when the ideal structure or sequencing isn't available. It's a plan B, and that plan B works really well until it doesn't. So let's say that someone has weak glutes or glutes that aren't quite engaging the way they need to. So rather than collapse, their system recruits, perhaps, spinal extensors to hold them up, and perhaps the back becomes the driver. Really, any part of the body can do this. I've seen people find it through their ribs, in between their shoulder blades, and up through the neck. It feels like effort so it feels like there's good work being done and to the outsider, it looks like strength. So it can be missed by a teacher who doesn't have a clear eye. But over time, those compensatory muscles fatigue, tighten up, shorten up perhaps, perhaps even flare with pain. Not because they're dysfunctional, because they're being used in a way that they're not designed to be used. And this is really key. Pain and compensation often show up because of strength, but it's a strength born out of necessity and not integration.

Susi 00:07:48 Here's where the nervous system becomes part of the picture. I like to say that the body will prioritize stability over efficiency. Now I'm using stability in a very particular way here. It will do what it needs to do to feel safe, even if it means recruiting tissue, muscles, myofascia, or other segments that aren't intended for the movement or locking down mobility entirely. So when someone is gripping their jaw or clenching their pelvic floor, or bracing the abdominals to hold a position, they're not being lazy. They're not doing it wrong. They're surviving the moment. I have this email that I wrote years and years ago about a muscle, the QL, being the superhero of compensation. And that's just not the QL that comes in with its superhero cape. There's all sorts of other parts of our body that do that. And ultimately, as we know more and more, it's the nervous system doing the best with the options it thinks it has. And

so we create this illusion of strong, effortful, rigid, braced. But it's not stable in the way that we think of functional strength.

Susi 00:09:03 It's not responsive, it's not adaptable and it's not resourced. So then what is true strength then? True strength is grounded, responsive. It doesn't need to yell. It knows when to fire and when to rest. It emerges from integration, not tension. And you can really feel the difference. One of the practices that we do in I Love Kinesiology is to help teachers and movement professionals really start to notice movement. And so three key questions that I like to ask is, you know, where are things working well here? And where are things not working as well as they could? And what's not working that should be? There's other ways that you can ask these questions. Just to provide different angles, right? Like looking at a diamond in a different light. So where is the body working too hard? Where are there areas that aren't working enough? And where is the nervous system simply trying to hold it all together? The idea here with these questions is to support us in really helping and honing our eyes. And when we know what to look for, we can start seeing compensations hiding inside strength.

Susi 00:10:21 And you start to feel the difference between engaged and gripped. Between stable and locked. That's why I like to say that you can't cue your way out of something that you can't see. Compensations aren't just misalignments. They're complex, layered strategies that reflect a student's history, habits, and nervous system imprint. So instead of correcting, we learn to observe, understand, and gently offer the body, really the human, new choices. So in the next segment, we'll explore what it takes to see those choices in motion and why the body's real story is told in the transitions and not in the poses themselves. So as we enter into segment three, what you can't cue your way out of, let's begin with this simple statement: you can't cue your way out of something you can't see. Most yoga teachers are trained to assess position, but what they're not taught is to observe trajectory, the path the movement takes. And that's where the real story lies, because compensation rarely starts or rarely shows up, rather, in the start or the finish.

Susi 00:11:30 It shows up in the transition between the inhale and exhale, between the intention and the lift, between setup and outcome, between the starting point and the ending point. Take warrior two, for example. From Tadasana, we take the legs wide and then rotate the front leg into external rotation. Usually we're on the heel, the toes are off the ground, and then the toes start to drop towards the floor as the foot lands on the floor. And oftentimes what happens is the pelvis drops as well. It breaks that frontal plane. And we might catch it either in ourselves enteroceptively or proprioceptively, the teacher might see it and then we say, oh, okay, better level out that pelvis. So then what we've done is we've compensated on top of that compensation. Another way to look at this is how did the person really get into that warrior two starting position? Why was it or what led to that pelvis wanting to break that frontal plane? Why did it want to move and slide through that frontal plane rather than staying level? What was contributing to that happening? To take this another step, inside of I Love kinesiology we train a sensory led observation.

Susi 00:12:44 We learn to consider like where in the system is there a hesitation or a rush? Where is there effort showing up that wasn't asked for? And where is the breath? Because movement isn't just muscular or even myofascial, it's informational. And what you're watching is the nervous systems decision making in real time. Here's another way to look at this: compensation often feels familiar and sometimes feel safe. People will say, but it feels "right" this way, and of course it does, because it's the pattern that's been honed over and over and over and over again, especially after injury, illness, stress or trauma. That's why overcorrecting can really backfire. Instead, we create conditions for new experiences that restore choice. One of my clients had a mid-back tension every time she lifted her arms. Her ribs flared. Her breath froze. So instead of more cues I just helped her connect to her feet. I helped her feel her breath. I helped her notice her arm bone in the socket.

Susi 00:13:54 And when did those ribs want to move? She didn't need fixing, she just needed access to a new trajectory. So this leads us into segment four, which is about compensating-to-connecting. So as you start to see the pattern, the question really becomes, how do you enable a shift without pushing or forcing? And this is where repatterning begins. And it begins with sensory restoration because we're not chasing form, we're offering experience which might mean; slowing the pace, very common for me; making the movement smaller or offering some form of a feedback cue, not to force an activation but to restore connection because so often when we're compensating, it's happening under our level of awareness. So how do we tune into that awareness without making what the person is doing is wrong? Because remember, compensation is a pretty clever and creative way to get something done. The key is we want to help reduce load a little before adding complexity. Too many people are trying to get into advanced poses in protective systems. So the aim here, and I really want to emphasize this, is by reducing load we're not downgrading.

Susi 00:15:07 We're, rather, we're decoding. We're helping the body to reorganize. And in helping the body reorganizing, we're ultimately facilitating trust that we have with the body, our body or with our students bodies. We don't need to micromanage every muscle or every movement, because when we create clarity and safety, the system often finds its way home quite, quite naturally. It's why when I'm working with people, they've got great range of motion, even though it's fully compensated. And I'll say, okay, you can keep doing that, just know that that's the pattern you're going to continue to maintain. If you move in the range without that compensation, that's the new pattern you grow and you'll ultimately get to the full range a lot faster than you can imagine, because now you're doing it in a more efficient, straightforward way that's utilizing the myofascial structures that are meant to move that joint. And things just start to settle on their own. We don't have to create anything big to make that happen.

Susi 00:16:07 We don't need some big release. The tissue shifts on its own because it's utilizing the tissue. The joint movement is utilizing the tissue that's required for that joint movement. It's doing all that it needs to do and nothing more. That's where safety and trust really, really find home. And as someone moves and feels better, or even before they let you know that they're feeling better, a really interesting question to ask ourselves or the student is: what do you now notice? It's not that I'm seeking something different. I'm seeking what they

notice and sometimes it will be different. And it's an important, singular question because it's training interoception and proprioception from an exploratory, curious space. It tracks integration. It gives feedback because we're not just trying to help people move better, we're really helping them to listen. And that's where true shift happens. If this episode has given you some ideas for seeing more clearly, and if something in your body or brain has said, oh yes, this is what I've been missing, then I invite you to explore I Love Kinesiology.

Susi 00:17:20 And you can find more information about I Love Kinesiology at [functionalsynergy.com/ilk](https://functionalsynergy.com/ilk). We don't teach what to do. We teach how to see and how to listen. Because when you can see and listen differently, everything changes. Alright, you have a great time exploring this, and we'll catch you next time. Take good care. Are you ready to uplevel your capacity and your skill? To hone your mastery as a yoga teacher? Moving towards being more of a therapeutic teacher or even a yoga therapist? Well, I think you will love I Love Kinesiology, where we delve into biomechanics, neuromechanics, gait, rest and recovery from a very strategic standpoint, and building strength like a real boss, but in a yoga effective way. Check it out over at [functionalsynergy.com/ilk](https://functionalsynergy.com/ilk).