

Ep. #333 - How To Stop Making Pain the Problem To Fix



Full Episode Transcript

With your host:

Susi Hatelly

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

Introduction (00:00.00)

You are listening to From Pain To Possibility with Susi Hatelly. You'll 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.

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Susi (00:22)

Welcome and welcome back. I am so glad that you're here because today, I'm digging into a gap that I've started to be able to name and get some real clarity on a gap that I see trainees of mine kind of fall into, and it's, I mean, it's totally innocent and it's an important one that we need to help retrain.

And for a long time I didn't quite see it as clearly as I see it now. So I'm really looking forward to this episode of sharing this with you, seeing how it supports you in your own work, and then if, if it really resonates with you to come into the therapeutic yoga intensives of this October, to dig into it and even into the certification program, to really elevate your skillset, working with people, helping them get outta pain.

Susi (01:09)

So right now I'm running the *I Love Kinesiology* program and I'm answering lots of questions where people are kind of moving through that phase of changing mindsets, which is really, really awesome. And I can also see where the friction and the static is.

And when people come into that program – *I Love Kinesiology* or my intensive or the certification program – all of them have skill. There are all some level of profession, whether it's yoga teacher, pilates teacher, physical therapist, massage therapist, chiro, they all have a level of skill and it's not that the problem they're facing with not getting the results they want is not having enough technique because they've got plenty.

Some of them, if we talk about it from the yoga therapy perspective or the yoga teaching perspective, they have all those tools. The PTs have their knowledge and their hands-on technique. The Pilates folks have their tools, right? There's the strength work, the manual therapy work, whatever. Whatever your toolkit is, you've got it all and you've got enough. Truly. That's not the problem.

The problem, or the gap, the way I think about it, is how you're thinking about it. I think this gap really is a reason why some people are getting the results that they really want with certain clients. So today, I wanna spend our time outlining what I think the gap is and then teaching right into it.

Because when I look back over the years at the history of trainees who've struggled, this one is one that is common. And when they make the shift, they have huge breakthroughs with their clients, with their own bodies, and it's really, really cool to see that change. Now, before I go there, I just wanna let us all get centered and embodied here.

Susi (03:07)

So where are you now? What's going on with your body?

Are you being your own best student? This is a really great place to start because much of what we're going to be talking about today isn't just about what you do with your clients, it's also about how you relate to your own body and people have no mean to say that it's really important to eat your own cooking without throwing up, so are you teaching that which you're practicing?

Susi (03:49)

So one of the things we're gonna be getting into in this episode is making a distinction between using your tools from a diagnostic perspective and from an observational perspective. And to me, this is quite significant because what I've noticed is that when people get in front of a client, there can be this default mode of *"I've gotta get this person out of pain."* *"I've gotta fix this problem."* And when you're coming into a scenario with a client from that perspective, you're really coming it from this perspective of, *"I'm here to fix what's wrong in place"*, and I'm wanting to offer a different conversation. Because for me, it's not really about the pain and getting someone out of pain, even though I talk about that an awful lot. It's about teaching them about their movement. Pain going down is the result of someone moving better. So time and time and time again, what I see is when I can help someone reduce compensation patterns, their pain goes down. And when I blend it with improving their interoception and proprioception capabilities, then their pain stays down and continues to stay down as they grow back up their ability to do their activities and add load and all that.

But pain becomes a result, not the fuel. And the important thing about this is that when we make this shift, we're making a shift from pain is a signal that something is wrong to recognizing that pain is a signal. And when we're seeing it as a signal and not something that's wrong, then we now are approaching a client in a very, very different way, not from a place of something that's broken, but rather they are moving in a really creative way to get a job done.

That creative way has served them for a really long time until it hasn't, and what I find time and time again is when we really come at it from this place of *"pain is a signal, not a problem"*, it doesn't indicate that something's broken, except truly if a bone is broken, people start to feel safer. Because again, if I'm coming at this room, I'm gonna fix something, then I automatically create an environment that the person has something wrong with them.

But if I can show them how creative they are in their movement patterns and compensation is an amazingly creative way to get a job done. They feel seen, they feel safer. In actuality, you get better results because you're working with their body and not against it. So this really is the

starting point to dig into this sort of default way that many people think about this fix it habit, and what we can do to move on.

Susi (07:13)

We really are swimming in a cultural soup of “fix it”. Whether you have come into this conversation from physio or physical therapy, fitness, yoga, pilates, manual therapy, the dominant training model is find the problem, fix the problem. And pain means that something is broken. Weak glutes will strengthen them. Tight hip flexors, stretch 'em. Achy knees, strengthen the quads. Now, I'm not saying that those interventions are bad. The truth is, sometimes those interventions are exactly what's needed. However, when we approach every client, like their body is a broken machine that needs repair, we're missing the bigger picture.

And more importantly, so will they, because here's the thing. As soon as we decide that pain is proof that something is wrong, the whole interaction changes. The space between you and your client gets that subtle broken label stamped on it, and they feel it. They may not be able to name it per se, but their nervous system does pick up on it quite instantly.

And because this is a thought pattern that exists in so many arenas of our world, they don't even really notice it consciously. Nervous systems do not relax in a “your broken environment”. It doesn't open to learning there. In fact, there's more opportunity for bracing and protection, and when we're in that phase, there's not really an opportunity for adapting.

Adapting in a way of creating positive change. Which means you can provide someone with all the “right” exercises – I put right in air quotes – and still not get lasting results. I remember working with one of my cohorts and I said to them, I'd like you to stop thinking about trying to get your clients out of pain.

And they looked at me like I had three heads, but I meant it. Because what I added is your fuel source for how you are entering into this dialogue with your clientele can't be about removing the pain. The pain isn't inherently wrong. The pain's not actually the problem. The pain going down is a result of better movement patterns.

So the fuel is teaching them about their movement. Showing them ways of how their brain and body can coordinate, helping that coordination get better. It's helping to improve their interoception and proprioception. Think of it like this: if you see a client as a collection of problems to solve, you'll approach them like a mechanic. If you see them as a coordinated system that's sending you signals, you'll approach them like a detective. Same body in front of you. Completely different conversation. And I've seen this “fix it” habit sneak in, even with experienced practitioners. It's so embedded in our culture, that even when you say you believe pain is a signal, you might still treat compensation patterns like there's something that's broken that needs to be repaired.

And this is the shift I wanna keep moving into today because the minute you stop labeling them as wrong and start seeing them as creative solutions, your clients will feel safer. You'll see more clearly, and you'll know exactly what to do without guessing.

Susi (11:07)

So in this next segment, we're gonna reframe pain completely, because if you can truly see it as a signal, not proof of damage, it really does change a whole lot, if not everything. So with that in mind, pain is a signal. Full stop. We know that it's not proof of damage. It's not automatically a torn muscle, a ruptured ligament or a herniated disc.

And I know even hearing me say that might feel a little bit uncomfortable because it might be, for you, a mindset shift. I've been training teachers and practitioners for a really, really, really long time, and I've seen lots of people nod along with what I'm saying, but they have trouble embodying the idea.

And here's why it's important and why it matters so much. When you fully believe that pain is simply a signal, your clients will feel your belief and they'll feel safer in your presence. And that's when their nervous system starts to feel more safe. And interestingly enough, their pain will go down. It's so fascinating, this world of relationship. And in that space is when the real work starts to land.

Susi (12:30)

Let's give an example of this where, which one of them has nothing to do with pain per se, but the other one does. So, I love bringing my kids into this, and I think I've told this story once before, but it really highlights it, which is we have a go-to restaurant that we have been to countless of times. Generally a similar menu, same staff most of the time, really comfortable place, the staff knows us, we know the table number that we love, it's like a, it can be a home away from home sometimes. They're really, really comfortable there. But you know what? If they wanna have a refill on their drink, sometimes they freeze.

The thought of them calling the server over absolutely terrifies them. Now logically, both them, and I know there's nothing to fear. But the reality is, that's not what's going on inside. So what do I do? I'm not the type of parent who pushes them into it. Right? I don't say to them, well, I guess if you don't wanna ask them for a drink, you're not gonna have one.

No. I look at like, what's actually the point? That's sort of the limit. I break the whole task into smaller steps, right? So we need to call the server over. We need to ask the server what it is that we want. So we just break that down, so then I can be the one who calls the server over. I can say to the server, okay, my daughter or my son has something to say to you, or I had to ask you, or something like that.

And then the server totally gets what's going on here, and then looks at them and says, what can I do? What can I help you with? And then their little voice are saying, *"can I have a fill up on my drink?"* And then they feel so amazing and they light up. It's like the light from within. It's like blasting them open. Right? Because what I've done is I've broken it down into smaller steps to help them succeed with the part they can do, and then we can build capacity over time.

Now, I'm not saying there aren't going to be times to lean into the fear. Sure. There are certainly times, and that will be a future episode, but in the early phases of this process, it's not the time to push. I've seen pain work in the same way. If someone's afraid to move, whether it's fear of pain, fear of making something worse, or fear because of a past injury, I'm not going to push them into the thing they're bracing against. We start where they can move with some ease and build from there.

Here's another example. One of my bike guides in Italy was in a horrific accident a couple of years ago, a tractor with a blade passed him on a narrow road and sliced him. I remember him telling me that it took him about three months to heal physically and another year to heal mentally. He told me how he had to walk himself through getting back on the bike and going on certain roads. Physically, he knew he was fine, but mentally, no. He had to rebuild his capacity step by step. See, this is what I mean when I say that pain is a signal. It's information. It's telling you something is up, but it's not automatically diagnosis of damage. When we actually honor that, and when we treat the signal with curiosity, no matter what the emotion is also associated with it, we create space for our clients to move, to explore, and to actually change the pattern.

Susi (16:17)

So as we move into the next piece of this episode, we're going to talk about how to move from a diagnostic mindset into an observational one.

This really gets us into the next shift, moving from diagnostic to observational. In a lot of training models, planes of movement get used as a diagnostic tool – which plane is broken, which muscle is off, which joint is stuck? The focus is on identifying the faulty part and then prescribing the fix.

That's not how I use them. For me, planes of movement are an observational tool. They help me see relationships between different parts of the body while someone is moving. Let's say a client is trying to externally rotate their hip, and every single time, their pelvis shifts. I'm not jumping straight into, *"oh look, their glute meat is weak, or their QL is tight"*, I'm watching and asking, what's moving that doesn't need to be? What's not moving that should? And how are these parts coordinating or not coordinating with each other? You see, here's the thing. Even if you do know exactly which muscle isn't firing well, and you give them the perfect activation or stretch, if you don't address the "why" that muscle is behaving the way it is in its first place, the same pattern will keep coming back.

So if I go to my osteopath and he does some work on me and there is this feeling of freedom or an ease or a 'something' that I'm experiencing, I get to explore what was contributing to why I wasn't feeling that way, and I get to retrain that pattern. There's nothing broken. I just utilized a creative pattern, which happened to get me into the scenario I was in.

So he didn't fix anything. He provided more input. To which I now can retrain a pattern.

This is also where the "fix it" habit can try to sneak back in. Someone might tell themselves, *"I'm not really in fixit mode anymore. I'm just improving the movement."* But if you're still treating

every compensation like a faulty part to replace, you're still in the same pattern. When you step into observation mode, your attention shifts from “what's wrong here” to “what's the relationship”, and there's a really big difference there.

Think about it. When you look at someone as a set of moving parts in a relationship, instead of a list of problems to solve, you stop chasing isolated fixes. You start seeing how the pelvis is interacting with the rib cage, how the femur is moving in the socket, and how the breath is playing into all of it.

And once you see these relationships, you can make incredibly simple targeted changes that shift the whole system. It's not about hunting for the culprit muscle anymore, it's about seeing the whole conversation happening in their body and deciding where you wanna enter in that conversation. And when you do that, you're no longer guessing. You're not hoping that the exercise you picked will magically work. You're guiding change based on what's actually there in front of you in real time.

Susi (19:30)

So in this next segment, let's reframe compensation patterns completely. Because when we can see them as creative solutions instead of mistakes, it can change how you and your client work together. Here's something that I say a lot, and I'd like you to take just a moment to let it sink in: there is no wrong movement. No movement is wrong. All movement is simply that – movement. And compensation patterns aren't bad either. They're not mistakes. Through your body mind's, creative solutions for getting a job done with the resources it has at the time. Like think about it, for every choice that we're making in movement, think of all the things our brain and our body is navigating. All of the layers of being. From not only neuromuscular or pain or injury issues, but also how we're holding her breath. Emotionally, what's going on? Mentally, what's happening? All of these things are being navigated when we're making the next choice. If your hip is stiff, for example, and you need to reach down to tie your shoe, your body mind will figure out a workaround.

Maybe your pelvis tips or your spine rounds. Maybe your foot swings up to the side. None of that's wrong. Smart. Now, just because it's smart and creative doesn't mean it's the most effective or sustainable choice long term – and that's where we as practitioners come in. Our job is to help clients keep the parts of those solutions that serve them and reduce the ones that aren't helping anymore.

When you reframe it in this way, clients stop bracing against themselves. They stop thinking of their body as this unpredictable, broken thing. They start to see it as adaptable, which in fact it is. I'll sometimes point out to a client, you've been moving like this for a really long time, probably since that injury years ago, and look at all of the things your body and your mind has let you do or let you keep doing with all of these workarounds. It's truly amazing.

Now, let's see if we can give you a few more options so you're not stuck with this one strategy.

This is a really cool reframing that's very powerful. Instead of bad posture or I moved wrong or a bum knee, it becomes, "I have a default strategy and I can learn a new one". Here's why this matters so much for the work that we do: if a client feels like you're going to take away the only strategy that they have, their system will resist. They'll guard more, brace more, and the very change you're trying to help them experience will stall. But when you acknowledge what's working, like for real. When you respect, for real, that the compensation truly is a creative solution, the nervous system relaxes. It feels safe to explore something new. That's when you can start reducing the compensation and introduce a new coordinating pattern.

And that's why I don't strip away someone's compensations in one go. I'm looking for a gentler handover so that they can actually receive it. So let me walk you through a simple, concrete example using "ankle to knee", also known as "figure four", or "thread the needle". Where you can hear how observation, safety, and retraining work together.

Susi (23:10)

So ankle to knee is a really common movement, whether it's in yoga or fitness or pilates. It goes by different names, as I've mentioned, ankle to knee. Your supine, you raise the leg up, rotate it, place the ankle on the knee, also called "figure four" or "thread the needle". And most people, the second they go into bringing the ankle up, they start moving all sorts of things that don't need to move: pelvis tips, ribcage flares, breath holds. That's their creative solution. That's the strategy they've been using to get the job done. So step one, don't change it. Like truly, just notice it. Notice the amazingness of this human getting this job done. Like for real, just that alone can be so powerful in relationship.

It's not dissimilar, if I could put it this way, as when you're with another person and they're telling you a story and you're listening to listen versus listening to respond. We can always feel when someone truly is listening to us versus they're coming up with an answer or the next thought in their head, ready to spit it out. Or even if it's a more lovely, heartfelt place, ready to share it, but they're not actually being present.

So it's common for me to say to someone, "Hey, that's so creative", "that is a great movement". Like really, really good movement. You got your leg into position and your foot is up on the ankle. Perfect. It works.

Now let's notice, let's notice some of this pattern. Can you lift your leg and rotate it without the pelvis moving? Remember, I'm not saying to push into more range. I'm asking them to notice what they can do. Without all the extraneous movement. And oftentimes the range is way smaller than they expect, and that's also where the magic begins because we now get to retrain in that range.

So often people can have the urge to push past those new, smaller ranges because they're so used to thinking that more is better. The reality is, if you train yourself to compensate and to keep intention, that is the result that you get. When you train in an easeful range, that range grows naturally. People find this really difficult to hold onto initially because they're so used to

forcing to try and increase range. But in the forcing, they do get more range, but it's full of tension because they've been forcing their way into it. That just adds more bracing and grip and more exhaustion into the system.

And yet, when you can find the range that doesn't have all the compensation, or at least to reduce compensation pattern, you might notice that the primary movement that's meant to happen will be smaller and something else will be present, whether it's ease or lightness or less pain or freedom. I mean, the word that people use, I've had people say that they feel peace and they feel giddy and they feel free. Like the words are their own. I don't need to know what those words mean, but those are words that are aligned with a system that is settling.

And often at the same time, they're noticing a relationship that's improving between their pelvis, their thigh bone, their rib cage, and their breath. And they're noticing a new possibility. So then when that new possibility exists – freedom or peace or any of those things – I get to say to 'em, *“Hey, guess what? That's now your possibility. You can have more of this. And the reason I know it is because your body has demonstrated it.”* That's where things get really, really exciting for people, and I've talked about this a few times in different episodes, is when we can name and acknowledge this new interoceptive change. They're embodying the experiencing differently, their more right-sided brain and their system is settling.

Susi (27:23)

So let's bring this all together now. This idea of pain is a signal mindset, an observational lens, and the respect for compensation. Let's see how you can use it in your own sessions beginning tomorrow.

And as you practice this in your sessions and you want more mentoring from me of how to really get good at it, I encourage you to join me at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. We're running it on October 25th to 30th, 2025. You can also work with me asynchronously, and that program begins mid-September.

Send me a note at health@functionalsynergy.com or go to functionalsynergy.com/intensive. I would love more than anything in the world to show you just how effective this type of work can be to helping your clients reduce and eradicate physical pain.

Susi (28:23)

So if we pull this all together, the gap that I've been talking about isn't a lack of technique.

You have them. You have technique and tools. The gap is in the approach. It's shifting from treating pain as the problem to fix, to seeing pain as a signal. Labeling compensation as wrong, to seeing it as a creative solution. Hunting for the broken part to observing the relationship between the parts. Forcing more range or strength to retraining coordination in ranges that feel safe and useful.

When you make that shift, your whole interaction with a client changes. They stop bracing against themselves. Their nervous system feels safer, and you stop guessing because you no longer are hoping for an exercise to work. You know why you're choosing it and what's supposed to change. This is not about a protocol. It's what you're engaging with with your client. You're seeing it, the evidence in front of you as you go.

Now, one other thing before I send you off and close this episode down: this isn't about throwing out what you already know to do. It's about expanding it, keeping those quick relief strategies for when they help and pairing them with retraining so actual change lasts. And you can start all this tomorrow, even today after you listen to this episode and work with your next client. Watch that client move and notice what's working well before you even look for what's wrong. Can you name three things that they're doing great, and mention one of them to them and celebrate it, not in a goofy way, but like they're doing something good. Then pick one piece of extraneous movement that's holding them or getting in the way and see if you can reduce it without pushing into strain. And retrain in that easeful range and notice what happens. And that's it. That's the work.

And if you wanna learn how to see these patterns with more clarity and know exactly how to guide clients from “fix it” to retraining without the guessing, that's exactly what we're doing at the Therapeutic Yoga intensive, and then more in depth mentoring with the certification program. Biomechanics, nervous system awareness and practical application so you can get results that stick for your clients and for yourself. Because when you stop trying to fix everything and start observing and retraining, you'll be amazed. You will be amazed at how quickly things can change.

And more than anything in the world, I would love to show you how. So check it out, functionalsynergy.com/intensive. I'd love to see you there. Until then, have a great rest of your day and we'll see you next time. Bye-bye.

Susi (31:24)

Hey, if you enjoyed this episode, I would love for you to join me in this October's Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. You can learn more over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**, where we'll dig in deeper to all these concepts and really set your track onto becoming a very skilled yoga therapist. See you there.