

Ep. #347 - Tight Hamstrings Aren't A Hamstring Issue



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 Hatley. 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 Hatley.

--

Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here for this episode on the hamstrings not being the problem, because it's a really important topic because so many people feel that their hamstrings are tight. They're trying to release them, trying to stretch them out, They have this perception, rightly or wrongly, that they're related to their back pain or whatever their experience that they're having that they don't like in their body, and if only they could release them, if only they could stretch 'em out, then all would be fine.

And we're gonna get into this episode in a very common refrain where the hamstrings are not actually the issue, they're holding tight or they're feeling like they're holding tight because of other things that are going on. And I'll outline some of those things in this episode for you to kind of ponder and explore and experience in your own body, and if you're a teacher with your students.

But I also wanna give a bit of context for this episode because I have to admit that what inspired this was an email that I read a couple of weeks ago that bugged the absolute bleep outta me. And the email was about tight hamstrings. And it had that classic, sort of, feel that tight hamstrings wreck your posture, ruin your spine, cause back pain, lead to hyper kyphosis and maybe end civilization. Okay, well maybe not the, maybe end civilization part, but the rest of it was what was written. And let me say that again – tight hamstrings wreck your posture, ruin your spine, cause back pain, lead to hyper kyphosis... It's just, it kind of drips of this fear-based, tension-based hamstrings are the villain type of writing.

And the reality is, what that tends to happen in people's bodies is this sympathetic tension-based drive, *"I'm gonna fix this thing"*, and what we know about healing and recovery is leading from tension doesn't make the progress you want to have happen. So it really bugs me from so many, from so many levels. When we talk about our bodies, when we market courses from this place of, *this part of your body is the villain*, you know, it's just what are we really trying to do here? Is that really helpful? Maybe that's a podcast episode in and of itself. So anyway, I just wanted to give that context for you because it bugged me. It really bugged me. And while I totally have the belief that there's many, many, many different ways into the body, there's lots of people with different views than me and have great results, and I honor them, honor them, honor them. This one around writing about a body part that's the villain, that one still gets me, still gets my bonnet in a knot, and perhaps from one other angle, it did inspire this episode. So we'll run with that.

So let's dig into this episode around why the hamstrings are not the villain. They're often made out to be. And why that whole narrative is way too simplistic. What's really going on, or at least some of the reasons of what's going on, why your hamstrings feel tight. And the spoiler alert, of course, is that **it's not the hamstrings**.

Susi (01:14.70)

So what are tight hamstrings, actually? So the first place that I wanna begin is that the tight part is what you are feeling. It's not necessarily actually what's going on with the hamstrings. So as I carry on with this episode, you'll hear me use the word "feeling" because again, tight is a very subjective experience. I'm not saying that your hamstrings aren't short, the reality is that when something is a subjective experience, it is a subjective experience. And as you improve the things that I mentioned in this episode, you're gonna notice that feeling starts to fade and another feeling is going to come into its place. And depending on who you are, it's gonna be a different word, right? Because as the subjective experience of tight starts to fade. A new subjective experience will arise. So for me, as I have a feeling of tight in my hamstrings, as I gain better function, I feel taller, longer, lighter, more buoyant, nimble, right? Those are also subjective experiences. So I just wanna make mention of that as we go through this episode, and you hear me use the word "feeling" a lot.

So ultimately, this hamstrings feeling tight is not a hamstring problem. Right. And you've heard me say that a few times already, and you might even in your head be like, *what? whatcha talking about? I feel it in the hamstring, so it's gotta be!* The thing is, is that hamstrings aren't tightening because they're stubborn, lazy, weak, old, misaligned or misbehaving. And I really want to make that clear. **They are responding to forces at play**. They're responding with this feeling of tightness because they're compensating. Because they're **protecting you**, and because something else in your system or your student's system is not doing the job. And so the hamstrings, in this case, are stepping in to take over. So if your hamstrings had a voice, they'd be saying, *Hey, guess what? I'm trying to help you out here*.

The real problem then isn't the hamstring. The real problem and what we can dig into is why it feels the need to do what it's doing and give you the experience of it feeling like it's tight. So whenever someone says to me, *I stretch and stretch and stretch, nothing changes*. One of my first thoughts tends to be, well, of course, because the hamstring isn't the driver, it's the responder.

So the next step is, alright, well then what is it responding to? What are the hamstrings wanting to hold together? There are many reasons why hamstrings can bring on this feeling of tightness in your being in your system. And here are three of them. There are three patterns I see over and over again, and I'll keep this on a surface level, I'm not gonna go into full, full detail because I wanna get into some of the ball mechanics.

So the first one is, **the back line isn't sharing the load**. Your hamstrings are part of a long line from your feet to your head. A continuous system along the back of your body, and when that line isn't sharing load well, it could be that your feet aren't grounding or maybe your calves or

glutes aren't participating and in either or all of those cases, the hamstrings will take over. Not because they're dysfunctional, but because something is needed and they're responding to that call.

The second is **the horizontal lines aren't coordinating**. Your pelvis, ribs, and head each create a horizontal line of balance. And when those lines don't communicate, when the ribs shift or the pelvis tips or the head drifts, the hamstrings feel the instability and tighten to keep you steady. So again, in this scenario – they're helping.

The third is **the system doesn't feel safe enough to let go**. Hamstrings are postural muscles. This means they're part of a group of muscles that quietly hold you up against gravity. They have this low level continuous tone, even when you're just standing there, doing nothing. So when your system doesn't feel very organized internally, and this won't be a conscious feeling by the way, necessarily. When your stability is unclear or unsteady, the hamstrings do exactly what they're designed to do. They increase tone to keep you upright and safe. They don't let go because you want them to let go. They let go when the rest of your system gives them permission to let go.

So there's not this inherent trust underneath, right? If your system doesn't sense that, then your hamstrings, if they're the ones that are holding, they're not gonna let go. **No amount of stretching is gonna override a system that feels stable.**

And the same goes for strengthening. Strengthening is not necessarily going to shift that. It's just gonna be strengthening on top of this layer of tension. So let's dive into some of the mechanics behind the hamstrings feeling tight.

Susi (09:05.06)

These are the structures and patterns that often, but not always, but often drive hamstring the feeling of hamstring tension. And once you can understand them, and then feel them, and then work with them, the feeling in your hamstrings really does begin to make a lot of sense. So let's begin with the **hip rotators**.

Your deep hip rotators, *piriformis*, *the gemelli*, *obturatoris*, *quadratus femoris*, are all primarily stabilizers. One of their key jobs is to help keep the head of the femur centered in your hip socket. And there's a few different images you can use to think about it. I mean, one is, think of it as an embrace. The ball of the femurs snugly into the cap of the acetabulum. They can also prevent sloppy movement. And when they're doing their job, there's a centering of the femoral head. There's rotational control. There's better control of the pelvis over the femurs, the single leg stance and your gait feels a lot smoother and more grounded. And when they're not modulating well, well there can be a lot of pelvic instability.

You might not get clear pelvic movement over the legs into forward bends. You might have some trouble coming into your warriors or even your warrior ones and warrior threes. Your system overall can sense the instability so more tension arises in your body and being, and

when that happens, for some people, the hamstrings might come in to save the day to help control pelvic position.

So you can see that what many people can experience as tight hamstrings in forward folds might actually be a **rotator shortness** or a **rotator confusion**, which can limit pelvic motion forward, it might cause the lumbar spine around more, and the hamstrings to guard. So this might make your longstanding hamstring issue, not a hamstring length problem at all, but it could actually be a hip rotator and modulation problem.

They're also the adductors and abductors. The adductors, your inner thigh, the abductors, the outer hip – they work together to create frontal plane stability. In part, they've got other jobs, but we'll work with that one for now. So you can think of them a bit like a steering wheel of the pelvis – it's not the exact metaphor, but it works, right? The idea that it helps keep your pelvis centered over the legs, controlling side to side translation, helping to regulate rotation at the SI joints. They can really support some lovely, lovely pelvic stability. And when they're not coordinating well, then there can be a lot more pelvic wobble. The femurs might not track very cleanly, and for many people, the SI joints can become very, very, very cranky.

Susi (12:05.09)

So again, the hamstrings could pop in here and say, *okay, if that steering wheel's not working, I'm gonna come in and compensate. I'm gonna overwork to support that pelvis.* So it's interesting if you've got both things between the rotators and the abductors and adductors going on, that's commonly what I see, right? Very, very, very rarely do I see people who have a one-muscle issue or even a two-muscle issue. It's usually a neighborhood of things that are going on, and just by talking about those two pieces, you can sort of get the picture.

But let's go into a third one: the bottom of the foot, which can often be considered the forgotten foundation. This one can be quite big and it's often overlooked if your foot can't sense the ground really well, maybe you grip the toes, or your arches might be collapsing, or you overpronate, or maybe there's a rigid over-brace arch, or a weak intrinsic foot muscles, or maybe you're just always kind of bouncing on your toes, right? In those cases, the entire back line often has to adapt – not always, but often. And in that case, when it's a compensation, the calves might brace and overwork. The tibias might rotate a little differently. The femurs follow that motion and then the pelvis adjust on top of that.

So the hamstrings might be tightening to manage the wobble, to manage that lack of nimbleness and agility. Because of the fascial continuity through that posterior chain, calves and chaotic foot movement can limit how the hamstrings can lengthen or release. So in this case, hamstring tension that felt sense can actually begin at the foot, gets magnified by the calves, and show up as, *“oh, my hamstrings feel tight”*.

But there's also another one, which people rarely expect, and that's the shoulder girdle. But what's interesting is that the conversation between the hamstrings and shoulder girdle, when it starts to improve, people are stunned, probably because they never expect it.

The hamstrings and shoulder girdle talk with each other through the thoracolumbar fascia and what's called the posterior oblique sling. Here's the idea: your latissimus dorsi attach into the thoracolumbar fascia and pelvis, and the fascia continues in through the glutes in the hamstrings, and the right latissimus dorsi is functionally linked to the left gluten hamstrings, as is the left lat functionally linked to the right gluten hamstrings. So if your shoulder girdle and latissimus dorsi are bracing or collapsing forward or yanking down, or living in the, *I'm gonna hold everything together up here*, then that tension can transmit down the chain, the ribs can get stuck, the diaphragm might not descend, this can shift the pelvic position, and the glutes and hamstrings might change the resting tone. So this upper body tension can become lower body protection. And freeing up the shoulder girdle mats can often have people say, *whoa, I can't believe my hamstrings feel so much easier, and I didn't even stretch them*.

I see this so often with my clients who are post-knee surgery or who have a lot of knee osteoarthritis, likely because they're trying to get up and out of pain. So they're gripping and holding, and bracing from higher up in their body. So as they free up that patterning, which is not really needed, and gain the stability and strength that they do need, their system just comes back online in a much more effective way.

Susi (16:03.98)

So let's look at one more here, and it's the **breath**. The breath really can be considered the quiet architect of all of this. When your breath is shallow or high in the ribcage, held or braced or rushed, the diaphragm can't descend very well, and if they can't descend very well, then there's often a relationship with a pelvic floor that doesn't respond very dynamically, and the deep core is unable to coordinate well.

The hip rotators lose a bit more of their fine control, and the pelvis loses a sense of internal support. So the hamstring does what postural muscles then do when they're in this sort of response – they grip. So between rotators, abductors, and adductors, the bottom of the feet, shoulder girdle and breath, and honestly with the people that I see, because they've had such lengthy, longstanding pain and strain, almost all of that is often involved in some regard. It makes a lot of sense why the hamstrings are hanging on and when I can help them come to a place where their system actually feels supported, then so much changes.

So overall, **hamstrings aren't bad, they're just responding**. And what we're wanting to enable is better load, better stability, and a heck of a lot more safety. And just as a side note, you can see why an email, like I referenced before, really does bug the living bleep outta me. Because that kind of email is not messaging from a place of safety, it's messaging from a place of trauma. And how on earth is that gonna support people in progressing?

Susi (18:25.08)

So then let's move into this place of why stretching rarely actually long-term solves it. It can be an initial relief, yes, and it can be a step in the direction, but **it's not the long-term gain**. Okay,

so, why does stretching the hamstrings not work? It can not work because it's not addressing hip rotator confusion.

It's not addressing adductor, abductor imbalance or foot mechanics, or shoulder girdle tension, or breath holding, nervous system guarding, or the pelvic instability. So the stretching is working on the hamstring *locally*, but we need to remember that the feeling of tightness in the hamstrings is created *systemically*.

So then what happens when you stretch them? Yay. You feel momentarily looser, but your system is saying, *I don't feel stable*, so that looser feeling fades pretty darn quick and it tightens up again. The bottom line here is **you can't stretch away a coordination problem. You can't foam roll away a stability issue. You can't bully a muscle into relaxing, when the nervous system is asking for it to guard.** So then what do you do? Well, this is where the real work begins. This is where you get curious, you get exploratory because those two qualities are qualities on your parasympathetic side. We get interested in how the foot interacts with the ground, how the femur sits and moves in the socket, how the pelvis organizes with the femurs, how the ribs relate to the pelvis, how the shoulder girdle and latissimus dorsi are loading through the back line, and how the breath coordinates with the entire system.

And as you do that, you'll start to notice your system settling. You'll start to feel what safety and support feels like in your body. You'll be able to hone an internal locus of control. And when that happens, it's aligned with these pieces above, those bullet points above – foot interacting with the ground, femur sitting and moving in the socket, pelvis organization, ribs related to pelvis, shoulder girdle and lats, breath coordination – when those pieces come online, hamstrings soften almost effortlessly. **They're releasing, as a byproduct of better coordination, not more stretching.**

Susi (20:36.21)

So the good news in all of this email stuff that I referenced above is that I decided to run a workshop on the power of the hamstrings, and that's what I wanna invite you to. If you wanna experience what's contributing to why your hamstrings feel tight, then join me this December the 8th, it's a Monday. We're gonna dig into a two-hour program on the power of your hamstrings. Not stretching them, not forcing them, but understanding them – understanding what they're compensating for, and helping to bring better coordination through your entire system. We'll work with the feet, hips, pelvis, ribs, shoulders, and breath, and we'll let the hamstrings reveal what they've been holding together for you and how awesome they've been doing it.

To learn more about the hamstrings course that I'm running, come to functionalsynergy.com/hamstrings. Because the bottom line is this: **your hamstrings are not the problem, they're the messenger.** And they've been trying to stabilize you often for years. And when you stop fighting them, really, and start listening, listening to what they've been helping you with, your whole movement system reorganizes. So if you wanna dig in, come and join me over at functionalsynergy.com/hamstrings. We'll see you next time.

Susi (22:22.47)

If you enjoyed this episode and you wanna dig in to really becoming skilled at helping your clientele reduce and eradicate physical pain through the process of seeing compensations and retraining compensations in a settling, safe, enjoyable manner that really just enables a system to settle on its own, I encourage you to join me over at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. I'm running it this coming April 2026. You can learn more about it over at functionalsynergy.com/intensive.