

Ep. #352 - The Deadlift



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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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Welcome and welcome back. I'm really glad that you're here because today we are breaking down dead lifting. And the reason I'm doing this is not just for biomechanical curiosity, but also to address three specific issues that I often come across in my work.

The first one is that it's really important when we get into lifting weights to have an understanding and interoceptively and proprioceptively. Interocept, meaning the sensations that are in our bodies, as well as proprioceptively, the actual mechanics and where our bodies are in space.

When we aren't aware of those things, it's really easy to compensate. It's really easy to overdo, and it's also really easy to underdo. But also, because I work with people who have pain and I help them get outta pain, and many of those people are either wanting to get back to the gym or they've been told by someone in authority that they should be at the gym and lifting weights, I wanna be able to really help them tune into their bodies so that they can recognize when enough is the right amount and how not to hurt themselves.

To pay attention more so to their body than to somebody who is perhaps egging them on and giving them the pompom motivation to lift heavier or further. And when I can help someone really tune into that experience, they can make terrific gains. So that's the essence of today. So let's get into it.

Before we get into the deadlift itself, I wanna start with interoception and proprioception. I've had conversations about both of these concepts throughout this podcast, and so this builds upon some of what I've already spoken about.

Interoception, I like to call it as being the inner sensation. Oftentimes, if you were to Google it, it refers to thirst and hunger, those types of sensations. And I'd like to pull them into also, you know, tightness, ease, fatigue, warmth, like whatever the whispers are that someone feels, a flare, maybe even a shift.

It's data in my mind that tells us something, but it doesn't tell you exactly what structure has created it. It's a sensation, not a diagnosis. It's a signal.

Proprioception is how your parts relate. How the pelvis moves relative to the femurs, or how the ribs connect to the pelvis, how the spine is moving, which part of your body is driving the movement, which is following, how do the feet receive the movement, or how does the load transmit through your body.

Right? The mechanics are telling you what is moving where, right? Another way to think about proprioception is noticing where your body is in space. The key here is that this is entirely different information from interoceptive information. Right.

And what's important to this is that they do live in the world together. They're just not "this causes this," per se. Sometimes yes, but more often than not, no. But they do provide data. And that data, when we analyze it well, can provide an understanding that can be so incredible for not only reducing pain, but for improving performance.

So the bottom line as we get into this is that our sensation tells us that our system has noticed something. Mechanics tell us relationships of the parts. That's where we're gonna move into today with deadlift.

I was recently teaching a session in one of my certification programs, and someone in the group had done a deadlift recently and she felt a familiar back sensation and had an assumption that she had hurt her back. And as we worked through movement, the sensation settled away.

What she realized is that she wasn't having a back problem per se, but really it was more of a mechanical organization problem. So her sensation was familiar, so her brain interpreted that sensation in a familiar way. And sometimes that can be part of the problem in the yoga and fitness and sometimes Pilates world.

So much of the cueing and the movement implies that sensation equals cause, but more often than not, I'm not saying all the time, but more often than not, it doesn't. That sensation is our body giving us information, and then we get to work with the data to figure out what that information actually corresponds to.

And this is a skill that can be developed, honed, and mastered in an incredible way.

So let's dig into the deadlift. Now, I'm not going into every single biomechanical component of a deadlift. What I am wanting to explore is what happens as we go down and what is going on on the way back up.

If you are a fly on the wall and on the way down, what we see is that there is a hip hinge. There are femurs that receive that movement. Knees that might soften but aren't actually driving the movement. The ribs are often connected, hopefully, and follow the pelvis. And the feet are receptive and not gripping.

And then on the way back up, that hip hinge, that hip flexion, that movement starts to become extension. The legs follow the pelvis. The ribs follow the pelvis. There's no thrust, no forcing, no bracing. It's parts related to parts.

And when the relationships between these parts is really clear and really clean, the load dissipates and transfers and absorbs really well. And then when it's unclear, or when there's compensatory patterns, or when the feet get into over gripping, or when there's a whole bunch of bracing between the ribs and the pelvis, or when things lead that shouldn't, like leading with

the lower back, for example, rather than a better connection between the arms, the torso, and the hips.

When the load concentrates in a compensatory way, then issues can arise. A sensation can grab your attention.

Now, one of the things that we often see with a movement like deadlifting is that there's a cue provided that has to do with bracing your core. And there are certainly times and places where bracing your core is really important, and that tends to be when you're lifting really, really heavy weight.

We can see this at power lifting in the Olympics, like high elite levels where they are thrusting extraordinary weight over their heads. But in a typical setting of me helping a client move from their work with me and into the gym, or a client who has been working with me, they've been out of pain and their mechanics are a whole much better, but they've been suggested by somebody else that they should lift and deadlifting becomes one of the things they do.

They will often wonder about this idea of bracing because they know, from what I say when I'm talking about getting into pain, I tend to stay away from the bracing mechanism of the classic navel to spine or lockdown or tighten or pull the ribs in.

They know that I tend to lead more of the notion of core stability as enabling us to be responsive, to be nimble, to be agile, to go from fast to slow and slow to fast, stop, go down to the floor, back up again.

And in my world, someone who is braced between the ribs and their pelvis can be not very nimble, not very agile. And we're not training agility or nimbleness either.

To me, when we train a braced core, then we're training a braced core. And in my world, that's not what I love to do. I want to train nimbleness and agility, adaptability and variability.

So I think that to know that as my context will be really, really helpful as you continue with this episode.

When I see people who brace in the way that I'm not sure is all that helpful, I see ribs that stiffen beyond what's needed. I see breath becoming shallow. I see a pelvis that doesn't move really well over those leg bones.

And there's a heaviness that almost creates a split between the ribs and the pelvis. There's not a connection, there's not a bridge in that area. In this context, bracing becomes rigidity and not support.

And as I've already mentioned, when you have rigidity, you don't have agility or nimbleness. And to me, that reduces your movement options. And fewer options often means a higher opportunity for strain. And a higher opportunity for strain means that there's an opportunity, yet another one, for the back to have to play a role that it might not need to play.

And that can lead to more pain or strain or that hurt feeling that can come about through the back because other parts of the body are bracing when they ought to be moving more effectively. Other parts of the body ought to be providing stability but aren't.

It's why some people can feel safer when they brace. Their back is more sore.

So all in all, bracing is not a bad thing. I'm not suggesting that. I'm not saying it's wrong. But in the context with which I'm teaching about it right now, it doesn't provide as much responsivity. And in my mind, being able to deadlift well means you need to be responsive. It demands responsivity, especially as load goes up. Parts need to be able to change shape and coordinate, not to brace and not to freeze.

So then what do you do instead? Well, in my mind, you want to have breath that moves easily with the load. A pelvic girdle that is more available than guarded. Ribs that are well connected to a pelvis. Feet that receive force and load and not grip so that there's an adaptation with the load change through the body.

Things transfer, dissipate, and absorb much better when this happens. Patterns in our system enable adaptability support. That support comes from clarity and not tension. Support is a response then, whereas bracing is more of anticipation in this context. Support distributes load, while bracing kind of concentrates it in a way that's very compensatory.

So with this in mind, what might you scan for as you're working with a deadlift? Well, the first thing I wanna make sure of is that you're not thinking of this as a checklist, but more as a conversation with yourself.

We're playing around with mechanics as well as with sensation. Now, yes, I will say that when we're tuning into our mechanics, there is a sensation associated with those. But I'm being very specific here because many of my clientele are highly sensitive.

They can tune in receptively into a lot of things, but where they don't have great attention, and this is what I teach them how to do, is where things are proprioceptively, like what is actually happening mechanically.

Is that leg bone moving in the pelvis? Is that pelvis moving on the leg bones? Are the ribs leading when they ought not to be?

That's the mechanical awareness that I'm wanting to have someone tune into.

So in the context then of a deadlift, as you approach the bar, can you feel the floor without gripping or clenching? Can you sense the center of your heel, the ball of your foot, the base of your pinky toe?

And then as you take the load, can you still feel those pieces? Can you feel your foot? And what has shifted or changed as you take that load?

Your ankles and your knees, sense into them. And as you begin to move, what's happening between your legs and your pelvis? And as you move, is the load being absorbed and moving through your ankles and knees?

As your pelvis moves, what are you doing with those ribs? Are they being pulled down or in, or do they naturally follow your pelvis and your shoulders? Are you gripping them down and back? Are you setting those blades or are they gliding with the ribs? Are they settling through the arms?

Then the grip of your hand around the bar. Is your breath being able to move well through your torso?

And this one is really, really interesting because before breath was breath, it was air in front of our face. And then a vacuum change, a pressure change happens and in goes the air. It turns into breath and it does all its respiratory thing. And then it goes back out as an exhale.

But here's the thing. The amount of bracing that you hold in your ribcage, even in your abdomen and pelvic floor, around your head and neck, and even your feet, yep, that can limit the ability for breath to do its breath thing.

Right? The respiratory system will be limited by the tension or tightness that exists in your body. So using breath as an indicator for you or yourself when you're lifting, like can it move easily or are you bracing? Are you holding your breath?

Because there's likely a correlation between what you're noticing in your tissue and in the segmental parts that are involved in the movement.

The key here is to grab some data. Try not to fix all of these at once. Simply just observe. And then when you notice something that you're ready to make a shift with, then make that shift.

So maybe it's simply that when you take the weight, your toes grip. So can you take the weight and notice that your foot is easy on the ground?

And how does that change the coordination between your pelvis and your legs, your pelvis and your ribs, your knees and your feet? Like how do your skeletal segments now move when you simply shift your feet, meaning you don't grip with your toes?

Or what about when you do move with your breath? How does your awareness shift and what do you feel different in terms of the mechanics of your body moving?

This leads us then into yellow lights. And if you follow this podcast for any length of time, I will periodically speak about the yellow lights because it's a fundamental piece of this sensory puzzle for helping people to reduce and eliminate pain.

We need to understand our subjective inner world, the sensations that our body is giving us. And when people start working with me, they clearly know what is pain. They clearly know their body screaming.

And as we learn to move better, as I guide them toward their mechanics and what they're attending to, their pain goes down. Because as someone moves better, their pain always goes down in my experience.

But when it goes down, something also arises. Sensations of no pain or less pain, to which I ask them, okay, so if that's no or low pain, what is there?

And what's there is often something like anything. It could be peace, it could be ease, it could be lightness, it could be strength. I mean, the word itself doesn't actually matter, but there's something present that's not the word of pain.

So here is where the yellow lights come in. As someone starts to recognize and retrain themselves out of a consistency of pain signals, they start to correlate that to their mechanics.

So when they're moving better, they notice other sensations because they're moving better. And when they start to recognize those sensations fading, maybe the peace feeling fades or the ease feeling fades or the lightness starts to fade, as they can catch that, they also recognize that there's a movement pattern that shows up, a compensation pattern.

And that compensation pattern or that ease feeling fading, that's a yellow light.

So what's really great about this is that yellow lights are indicators. They're signals. They're letting us know that something's up. They don't mean that danger is present. They're giving you access to what your system is saying. Something is happening. It's time to pay attention.

Everything is still safe. Just attend your attention to the mechanics of your body and to your breath, and notice what's also present.

So a yellow light then is a sensation increasing, meaning the sensation that's increasing towards something that might be like pain while clarity is still available.

And this is what becomes really powerful when we are playing around with deadlifting because if you are someone who's returning back to the gym and you have had previous patterns that have a lot of compensation and you've cleaned up a lot of that patterning.

You come back to something like a deadlift, you're now adding more load. Well, when you add more load, you're asking your body, you're demanding of your body to do more.

And so you've gotta be aware of how does your body now absorb and dissipate that load? How do the mechanics take that load?

So when you can recognize some of those sensory awarenesses, those yellow lights, you can tie them together with mechanical patterning because when yellow lights emerge, very often, pretty much all the time, there's a compensatory mechanical pattern that's along with it.

It doesn't mean one's causing the other, as I said at the very beginning of this episode. However, it is indicating that there is something correlated occurring.

So again, yellow lights, those whispers are workable. They're adaptive. They provide the space for change to happen.

So what does this sound like? Perhaps when we're working with a deadlift, it might be that there's a whisper in the back or a line of tension around the ribs or something in the hip or a foot that might feel a bit more active than normal, or something that feels a bit like fatigue in some of your tissue.

That's more than just that you've done a bit of work, you know?

None of these actually require stopping, per se. The real question is, are you able to sense relationships like for real, for real, between the pelvis, the ribs, the legs, and the feet?

And then if the answer is yes, then consider you keep going. And if no, maybe slow down.

I mean, ultimately it's up to you. It's your body, it's your sensation, it's your interpretation of that.

If you make the right choice and things feel good, then you've got more data. If you make a choice that maybe wasn't quite correct, then you've got more data like that too.

So no matter what happens, you'll get data for making better decisions. But the key is to pay attention to it, not simply to push through the movement for the sake of it.

Because if you're pushing through for the sake of it, and you're blowing by the yellow lights, as we often call it, then you're building out patterns. That's the habit that you're building and that's the mechanics that you're honing.

And you're ultimately likely going to have more pain and strain. There's likely gonna be compensatory patterns that are gonna build up and are gonna create some problems.

So as I bring this episode to a close, the whole intention behind this episode was to utilize the deadlift as an opportunity to expand upon this idea of mechanical awareness, also known as proprioception, where a body is in space and really feeling the skeletal parts or segments moving relative to each other.

And also this interoceptive sensory component, and to recognize that both worlds, proprioceptive mechanical information and interoceptive sensory information, both are subjective experiences in our own bodies and they provide data for how we're doing.

And the more that we can be able to tune into them and see that data as data and then be able to analyze it and understand it, we will help ourselves continue to reduce pain, continue to plow forward with better performance.

If we push past yellow lights, if we decide to not pay attention to this mechanical relationship of our bodies, the problem arises where we train compensatory patterns. We have body parts doing things that they aren't meant to be doing. And that puts more strain in the system.

It leads us to then doing things like doing more bracing in the core and breath holding, which compounds the problem. And that can lead to more back issues and other issues for that matter.

So as you go into your deadlifting world, consider how are your segments actually moving? Perhaps take a video of yourself. Are you moving in the way that you wanna be moving?

Can you bring a little more ease into the movement, even though you're lifting heavy? And then what does that do in terms of your own experience of breath, power, and ultimately recovery?

Have fun with your dead lifting, and we will see you next week.

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So is this fascinating for you? Do you love the idea of exploring mechanics, interoception, understanding how all this plays into reducing pain and improving performance? Well, you'll love the therapeutic yoga intensive. I'm running it this April, 2026. It's my six-day Therapeutic Yoga Intensive where we break down movements into small component parts so you can actually see movements and what makes them up.

I can't tell you how vital and how important this is to helping people reduce and eliminate physical pain. And when you tie it in with the interoception awareness that we can help our clients grow, you will blow your mind at how quickly, truly, you can help your clients reduce pain sustainably and ongoingly.

You can learn more over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**. Hope to see you there.