

Ep. #363 - When More Range of Motion Doesn't Solve Pain



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 because today we're digging into a common assumption in the movement world, whether it's in yoga or Pilates or in fitness, and that's the idea that what people need is more range, more flexibility, more mobility, more depth in a movement.

And in the world of pain and pain reduction, there's often assumption that if something hurts, the thinking is that there must be something tight. That the solution is about stretching, loosening, opening, and increasing range. And because range is so easy to see and easy to measure, it becomes the thing that people chase.

So it's not uncommon for someone to just do a little bit more in a stretch, a little bit more in a stabilizing program, or a little bit more in their twist, going a bit deeper into their squat or forward fold. It's because these changes, what we see is visible, and it's really easy to assume that if range improves, things must be getting better.

But it's actually not true. Range improving is not correlated to pain reducing. We know that. But here's what's interesting. If we flip that around, I have seen a correlation of pain reducing and range improving.

Lemme say that again. There's not a correlation to range improving and pain reducing as a result of that range improving. There's not a correlation there. But I have seen over and over and over again that as we reduce pain, range improves.

So rather than making range the thing to do, it becomes the result of. So lemme say that one more time. When someone I'm working with reduces their pain through all the means that I have in terms of improving movement patterns, their range also improves.

And for people who come to see me and have been working on range as the vehicle, their pain hasn't improved, partly because their pushing so hard into range and they're bracing and compensating and gripping. They're not giving their neuromuscular system even a chance to facilitate chains.

So let's take us a little bit deeper. Range by itself doesn't actually tell us very much. Because a body can move further doesn't mean a movement pattern is actually changing. And when people try to move further without the movement pattern actually changing, people will often

spend lots of time chasing range without resolving what's actually going on under the movement.

So let's go a bit further into this about what range tells us and what it doesn't tell us, and why focusing only on range can really lead people away from solving pain rather than toward it. And I'll also add that when people only focus on range, it can really lead them away from strength and stability as well.

Now if you're new here, my name is Susi Hatley, and this From Pain To Possibility Podcast is where we explore how movement works through the lens of me working with people for over 30 years, where I blend my bachelor of science in kinesiology with therapeutic applications of biomechanics and yoga to help people get out of pain and to really enable yoga teachers to get great results with their students.

I call it being a movement detective, and the premise of being a movement detective is that instead of forcing the body into positions, we learned how to observe patterns, notice responses, and understand what the body is actually telling us.

And when we can do this from practitioner, meaning myself with my client, and the client learns this patterning in their own bodies, they have so much more empowerment and understanding about the way their body moves, the sensations in their body, and what they're actually saying to them and what they can specifically do to support themselves, not only in continuing to reduce pain but to get stronger and more stable consistently.

Range of motion is one of the easiest things to notice in the body because it's visible. We can measure it. We can compare it. We can see change. And because it's so visible, it can become an easy marker for progress. Not an accurate one, but an easy marker.

The body is really good at adapting. If you ask it to move further, it will find a way to do it. When ambition overrides patience, we will find a way. It's the brilliance of our neuromuscular system. We'll shift effort from somewhere else. We'll borrow motion from another part of the body. We'll grip with our jaw to move through our hips.

And from the outside, it will look like progress because a movement goes further. The range increases.

But the important question that's still sitting underneath an observation was, well, how did the body actually get there? Because two people can be doing the same movement and it can look quite identical from the outside, but how the coordination is actually occurring is completely different on the inside.

And that difference really does matter, especially because when someone, as an example I just shared with you, uses their jaw to grip to help move their pelvis, they don't even realize in many cases that they're doing it. It's the brilliance of the creativity of compensation. It's what helps us keep going even when we don't have the movement patterns to do it.

Let's take a really simple example. Someone will believe that their hamstrings are tight and they'll feel tension when they bend forward. They've been told they've got tight hamstrings, so to them the solution really seems obvious to stretch the be geezers outta their hamstrings. And so they do.

Whether it's a standing forward fold or a seated forward fold or a supine forward fold, they try to lengthen the back of their legs, and they feel that they're getting a stretch. And in some cases, they might even notice that they're getting more range.

Except they also notice that an hour later, a day later, two days later, their hamstrings are tighter than even they were before. So they might have some extra range, but they're still feeling so locked down.

We see something similar with shoulders. Someone might be working on bringing their arms more overhead. This is really common for people in downward facing dog. And they push that much more to make that range of motion happen, and they get further. They get further into their downward dog because they've gone further.

To the untrained eye, it looks like they've gained more shoulder mobility.

But if you observe both scenarios carefully, what we actually see in the movement patterns is some degree of compensatory strategy. In the shoulders situation, a really common one is that it looks like the rib cage lifts and that there's a little bit more spinal extension than what's needed.

So it looks like the arm is moving higher, but when you see where the movement's actually generated from, it's more from an area through the torso and not actually through the shoulder joint.

In the hamstring situation, it can come from a bunch of different areas, whether it's a flattening of the back towards the floor in a supine hamstring stretch, or whether it's a gripping through the jaw, pulling up through that pelvic floor, gripping through the feet in order to pull just a little bit further.

There's multiple ways that people compensate, and again, as I've mentioned, they don't even realize that they're compensating it because their intention is strong for improving their range that their system just finds the way.

Bodies are amazing this way. Neuromechanics are amazing this way. Our nervous systems are amazing this way. And in that amazingness, what begins to develop are habitual patterns.

And these habitual compensatory patterns contribute to more tension, more bracing, more gripping. They create underlying patterns, and I say underline because oftentimes it begins outside of our realm of awareness.

But when we add load, like we try to get stronger or we try to add stability, because the undercurrent of the patterning is unsteady, people get injured. And they're the same people who kind of hold onto this consistent and persistent low grade level of pain that flares every so often.

They don't really understand why, but because it consistently happens, they often find themselves coming back to a similar perceived solution, which is, oh, I must be tight, I should stretch more. And so the metaphorical vicious circle continues.

The bottom line here is that flexibility and range aren't the drivers for resolving pain. Pain is rarely a flexibility and range problem. The real bumper sticker here is that it's a pattern problem.

It's how a body, how a neuromuscular system, how a motor control and coordination systems absorb, dissipate, transfer, distribute load and effort. It's how joints are involved. It's which areas are doing too much. It's which areas aren't doing what they need to.

And it's how our nervous system interprets what we're trying to do.

And if this pattern remains the same, it grooves itself in. We can increase range all we want. But if that pattern, if that habitual pattern is there until it changes, increasing range isn't gonna change the experience.

I'm recording this episode in the spring of 2026, and I've been updating my Power of Pure Movement series. And so far I've run the core program, the SI joint program, and we're about to run the glutes.

What's interesting in each of these programs is the consistent thing that is happening when people notice their pain reducing. When they notice their SI feeling quieter, when they notice their core connecting and they feel lighter, it's often when their movement becomes smaller.

Not because their movement has become smaller, but because we're now recognizing and shifting the patterns. And to do that, oftentimes the range gets smaller at first because movement patterns that have compensation in them in a small range are gonna still have compensation in them in the big range.

So if we're going to shift the habitual pattern, oftentimes we're stopping where the compensation begins, and that is in a small range.

People will then ask, okay, I feel really great, Susie. This range is really small though, and I don't like it. Because they also have a pattern of thinking they must have a bigger range.

I understand it. And what I say to them is what I'm gonna say next here. And that is if you continue to move in a pattern that honors the way your body actually moves and not trying to force your range, your range will improve.

When you try and force your range, you add in compensation. Forcing is interpreted as a threat in your nervous system. Forcing is what asks our body to compensate and pull from another area.

When we can recognize the actual movement pattern that's needed to do whatever movement we're asking to do, keep the compensation quiet. Now we're growing efficiency in movement.

We're asking the body to do a movement, and that part of the body is doing it. When we recognize the compensation is happening, we stop the movement.

If we practice that, if we use repetition in doing that, guess what happens? Range naturally improves without the tension, without the bracing, with the ease, with the quiet, with the peace and freedom.

So the bottom line here is this. Instead of asking how can I increase my range, a movement detective asks different questions.

When we're looking at this movement here, what is actually happening? What's the intent? And based off of the intent of the movement, is it actually happening?

Are the joints that are meant to be involved involved? Are there joints involved that are not meant to be involved?

Is the tissue that's meant to be doing this movement involved? And is there any extraneous work from other muscular tissue involved that doesn't need to be?

A really simple way of asking that is like this. Based off of the intention for this movement, is what's supposed to be happening? Yes or no?

Is there anything extra that's happening that shouldn't be, or that doesn't need to be? Yes or no?

So quiet the stuff that's not needed to be involved here, and then do the stuff that is.

And if it sounds in my voice like this is simple, it actually really is. The tricky bit is when someone's like, but I have to have greater range.

And it's in that place I say, I get it. And all I need you to do for the next 10 minutes is move in this range, moving the way that we're intending for the movement to happen, quieting what's not needed for the movement, nurturing what is.

And as you do, you'll find yourself more steady, sustainable, solid, free, lighter. Because all that extra work that you were doing to try to make range happen, all that tension, all that bracing, it's not involved.

The effort goes down, energy goes up, smoothness goes up, and so does ease.

To summarize this episode, I wanna make sure that what I'm not leaving you with is that I think range is the enemy, or that stretching is bad, or that flexibility or wanting to improve flexibility is wrong.

No, not at all.

All of those things are terrific when they become the vehicle. For a lot of people who have pain, it often leads to the result they don't wanna have, which is more pain.

When we can focus in on the outcome of coordination, of better load distribution, the way that load is absorbed, dissipated, transferred, doing movements in a way that the nervous system is clearly trusting.

When we go about movement in that way, range improve naturally. Flexibility improves naturally because the body no longer needs to guard or protect.

So if you're thinking the answer is simply to increase range, I want you to think more closely about how is your body or your client's body is actually moving.

What is the intention? Where is the effort going?

When you can help them tune into their movement patterns more closely, you are gonna help them make such incredible change.

Start with those questions.

What is the intent of this movement? What is meant to be working? What is not meant to be working but actually is showing up right now?

Let's quiet that. Let's nurture the first.

And if you want more help with this, if you want my eye, if you want my experience to support you in leveling up your own skill towards gaining some mastery at supporting people with movement and breath and stillness to reduce and eliminate pain and gain strength and get back to the activities they wanna do, I'd love for you to join me at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive.

It's happening this April, and it's a small group, so the mentoring is very succinct. It's very direct.

We work with your body. We work with people's bodies in the group so that you can really see what's going on and make the gains that you really wanna have.

You can learn more over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**.

Hey there. Did this episode ring true for you? Are you noticing and thinking about range of motion in a different way? Do you wanna uplevel your skill to really help your clientele more effectively reduce and eliminate pain and then gain strength effectively? Come join me over at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive this April.

Check it out at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**.

We'll see you there.