Ep. #364 - Kyphosis: Why "Stand Up Straight" Doesn't Work

Full Episode Transcript

With your host:

Susi Hately

From Pain to Possibility with Susi Hately

Introduction (00:00.00)

You are listening to From Pain To Possibility with Susi Hately. 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 Hately.

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Welcome and welcome back. I'm really glad that you're here today because we're talking about kyphosis and really about posture. I see a lot of people, especially in my private practice, who will come to me. In addition to the things that they want to improve, they also wanna improve their posture, especially when there's a kyphosis that's present.

And so, with that in mind, let me start with a question. Have you ever tried to fix your posture by simply deciding to sit or stand up straight? Or better yet, has a client told you that they've tried to fix their own posture by doing that, or maybe pulling the shoulders back or lifting the chest, or maybe giving a cue of length in the spine? And maybe it worked for about 30 seconds. And if you really noticed how you felt in that position, it probably was with a little bit of tension. And slowly, almost without noticing, the body, after a period of time quite short, it drips back to where it was before.

It's really common, and the reason's quite simple, because posture is not something that you hold. Posture really is a combination between our structure and how we embody our structure. So it's something that emerges. It's a result of how we move.

So posture really is not something that needs to be fixed per se, right? Think about it. If someone is choosing unconsciously, of course, the way that they're embodying their structure, basically their skin sack of bones and muscles and connective tissue and fluid and electrical impulses and all the things, if someone's embodying that skin sack of all of those things, then what's actually wrong? That is where they feel the safest and most supported. So why does that really need to change?

Now I will carry on with expanding on that idea, but it's a place where I want to pause. Because so often people will want to fix the posture because it's in a kyphotic state. There's something wrong being in a kyphotic state. When someone sees a round upper back, the instinct is usually to correct it directly, right? Pull the shoulders back, stretch the chest, strengthen the back muscles. They're asking the question, how do we fix this?

But as I've already mentioned, as a movement detective, we don't even go there. Because again, posture is not the starting point. Posture is a visible outcome of how the body parts are coordinating, and not just biomechanically but through the whole body and mind, like bioenergetically, biospiritually, bioemotionally, all of it.

It's like looking at the surface of the lake. If the surface of the lake is choppy, you could try to smooth the water out with your hands. But really, what's really going on? What's the environment here? The wind, the current? Is there something disturbing the water below the surface? And posture can be viewed in a very similar way, where what we see on the surface reflects patterns happening underneath.

To simply say, let's pull the shoulders back and stretch the chest, is more like taking the hands and trying to smooth out the water.

Again, I wanna emphasize here that when someone tells me that their posture is what it is, one of the first things that I'll respond with is what's gonna be really interesting in this process of working together is that, as your compensation patterns shift, we'll probably see some change in your posture. Because much like pain, I don't often see posture changing by actively trying to change it. I don't see pain changing by actively trying to change it.

However, when we shift movement, compensation patterns, biomechanical patterns, breath patterns, we often see pain go down and even away, and often posture changes.

So think about this as posture being a system output. Posture rarely begins where it shows up. It's a system output. It reflects how multiple regions of the body are coordinating with each other and how we are embodying that coordination mentally, emotionally, spiritually.

So biomechanically, if we look at it from feet, legs, ribs, spine, and head, if the legs aren't contributing effectively to the support, the upper body will often work harder. Or if the ribs are not moving well with the breath, the thoracic spine might appear more rounded. If certain segments aren't participating well, neighboring segments will compensate.

So when someone says to a client, stand up straight, they're attempting to change the shape of the body without actually changing the patterns that facilitated the change of shape.

And I'm saying patterns here not just movement patterns, but the relationship between us and us, our body and mind, our body and spirit.

That's why when you look at some posture and you really look at the before and after, you'll see people that are more aligned from head or ear to shoulder to pelvis to foot. But what you'll also see is not a ton of ease, but quite a bit of tension.

So in my view, one of the things I'm wanting to solve for is to support someone in really settling through their nervous system. And I do that initially through better biomechanics, reduced compensatory strategies. And as that ease settles in, that felt sense of safety, that is what fundamentally changes the way that someone embodies their space.

We have to remember that the body is remarkably good at solving movement problems. If one area doesn't move well, another area will help. Remember, this creative helping is compensation. It's a creative solution to something that's not working. It's the body's way of keeping you moving.

And over time these workarounds become habits, right? So the thoracic spine might be stiff, and the neck might start moving more. Or if the ribs aren't moving well, then secondary breathing muscles may start to assist with breathing. If the hips don't rotate easily, the feet or the knees may get involved.

So from the outside movement still works, especially to the untrained eye. But underneath the coordination is becoming more and more inefficient.

So as a movement detective, as I'm helping someone improve those compensatory strategies, we see the inefficiency sort out. Efficiency comes back online. And when those efficiencies come back online, when the compensations decrease, there's a much better neuromuscular coordinating pattern.

This tends to open up a dialogue around kyphosis as a postural deviation, where a lot of people assume that this is caused by tight muscles, tight chest, tight fascia, tight shoulders. And sometimes yes, I have found that tightness is a part of the picture.

But inside of my studio I see something a little bit different, somewhat of a nuance. Instead of having too much tension or tightness in one place, it's more about seeing the absence of movement, an area of the body that's become quiet or a region that no longer expands. Not out of tension, but just an area that the nervous system has gradually stopped using.

And then when that happens, other areas start to take over. Over time the shape of the torso adapts to those strategies.

And when those quieter regions begin to move again, even very subtly, the whole of the system can recoordinate. And I saw this happen really recently with a client when we were doing cat and cow, and she was moving a whole lot in one area but very little in another. So we addressed that area. That was when she all of a sudden began to really stand a lot straighter, a lot taller, without even trying to.

This leads to one of the great paradoxes of therapeutic movement. So many people often assume that bigger problems require big solutions—more stretching, more strengthening, more intensity.

I found that some of the most powerful changes happen through very small, very deliberate, specific movements.

When a previously quiet segment of the spine or ribcage or torso begins to be involved again, then we can count on less compensation needing to be online as much.

When the ribs regain movement, for example in the example I just gave, breathing begins to change. The pelvis relates to the ribcage differently. Feet tissue started to relax. Legs got stronger quite naturally. It was as if she dropped into her legs. We see muscle tone begin to shift.

Now in that state the body has more options. As the body has more options, we see longer, more sustainable changes in posture.

We also need to remember when it comes to posture the thoracic spine and rib cage are clearly part of the breathing system.

With breath, ribs are meant to move, their subtle motion through the T-spine. But if there is tension through the abdomen or the neck, even down as the pelvic floor, that ability for the body to move reduces.

And the ability for breath to really, like for the air that's sitting in front of the face to enter in through the nose because of that pressure change, that vacuum change, that becomes more limited because there's not that expansion for that pressure change to build from.

And what we see over and over again is as we move better, as the mechanics shift, that suppleness, that responsiveness of the tissue around the ribs, the abdomen, the pelvic floor begins to shift. Then the secondary breathing muscles don't have to work so much.

They feel more space, more ease, often taller—not because they're trying to stand taller, but because the body no longer needs the same rigid strategy.

When they have a new strategy, they begin to recognize that the bracing or the tightening of their back, which they were doing to pull their shoulders down or to hold their abdomen, that feels very distinct from what efficient support feels like.

Tone without strain. An active body that's not rigid. Breath that can move easily. A spine that can adapt.

People often describe this feeling as taller, lighter, more spacious, and also more relaxed, steady, grounded. And that combination, relaxed yet supported, that's usually a sign of better neuromuscular mechanics.

As I sum this up, I want you to consider posture is a little like a shadow cast by a tree. You could try and change the shape of the shadow on the ground, but the shadow will always reflect the shape of the tree above it.

Posture can work the same way. It's the shadow, where the movement is the tree.

If we change how the body moves, we shift up the neuromuscular patterning. The posture, much like the shadow, will often change as well.

So here's a small experiment I'd like you to try. Instead of sitting up straighter, just notice when I am moving, whatever movement I do, where does it feel easy? Where does it feel restricted? Where does my breath move easily and where does it not?

Those questions of curiosity are the beginning of becoming a movement detective with your own body.

Because again, posture is not something that we impose on the body. To facilitate better posture, posture emerges from the embodiment of our structure.

It emerges from the way the body moves.

Learn how to move better with better coordination, more ease, and less pain, and you'll find your posture naturally shifts.

If you wanna dig into this more, if you are a teacher and you wanna do this for your clients, if you wanna become a true movement detective, then check out the upcoming Therapeutic Yoga Intensive Training happening this April 2026, April 18th to the 23rd.

You can take it live online or by replay, and you'll really dig into this notion of your posture is a combination of your structure and how you embody that structure. It arises out of better movement. You don't have to force it to happen.

Read more over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**.

Hey there. Did this short posture discussion resonate with you, and do you wanna take it further? If so, this April I'm running the therapeutic yoga intensive.

A small group focused attention on both you and your body and your skill of teaching, helping people to reduce and eliminate physical pain. And as a result, yes, their posture doesn't improve.

I'd love to teach you.

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

Take care.