

Ep. #365 - The Pathway of Change: What Getting Out of Pain Really Is



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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Welcome and welcome back. With this episode, I wanna bring together something that I've been observing for more than three decades while helping people get out of pain. Over those years, I've worked with clients dealing with chronic pain, persistent levels of pain, autoimmune systems, frozen shoulders, scoliosis, kyphosis, and people recovering movement patterns after cancer treatment.

At first glance, those situations might seem really different, but underneath them is a very similar process. Essentially, what I am helping the people who come to see me is to change. Now, that word can be tricky. Most people, when they come to see me, they're not really thinking that they need to change.

They're coming because they want something to go away or, or reduce or something like that. It's about the thing that is restricting their life as opposed to them themselves, which makes total sense. But then something really interesting begins to happen as they practice and explore movement patterns.

They begin to recognize that I am not someone who chases symptoms. You know, whether someone has a frozen shoulder or scoliosis or persistent levels of pain, I'm not trying to get rid of any of those things when I'm working with someone, because in my mind, they are a result of things. And when I can help someone learn how to move better, to teach them about the coordinating patterns that they have ultimately habituated, and to recognize the compensatory patterns that are quietly operating in the background, clients begin to see things, to feel things that they couldn't see or feel before. And then they change. They change, right? Because you can't change anything you're not aware of. So by becoming aware, they can make fundamental change, and out of making the fundamental change, their symptoms begin to shift.

So with every person that I've worked with who has a frozen shoulder, when that shoulder thaws, it has zero to do with their shoulder. We haven't worked anywhere close to their shoulder. When someone feels better in their scoliosis, and in some cases we can actually see the curve shift, we didn't go after the scoliosis.

When pain is reduced, when it goes away, we haven't been going after the pain. So in the process, people understand that these symptoms themselves are not the enemy, but rather they're information, they're signals. And as people begin to relate to the symptoms in that way, then the symptoms start being an adversary and become a messenger.

Now, the way that I work with someone, it's relatively straightforward for this to happen because when people start to recognize movement patterns, breathing patterns, stabilizing or stillness patterns that they didn't know were there, and then they recognize them and they can attend their attention to those things, and they recognize when they attend their attention to those things, their pain goes down.

They start to see it very, very clearly that it's not the pain that we're trying to change, but it's the patterning. And with this shift, it also allows people to reconnect with their bodies in a way that, while in some ways feels new, it also has a strange, almost really coming home familiarity to it at the same time.

And it's that reconnection that is really the crux of how I help people move out of pain. Now, here's the interesting challenge. When someone shows up in my Zoom room, rarely are they arriving at the beginning of the story. They're arriving somewhere in the middle, where pain is already present. Movement is already restricted.

Something does not feel right. In other words, their system is already showing what I like to call a red light or even a scream. So we can't go back in time and watch earlier signals. The yellows, the whispers—those have already happened. People have already moved through them, oftentimes without even realizing it, because most people simply were not taught how to recognize the whispers before the screams, or the yellow lights before the red.

We live in a cultural reality where most of modern medicine, while of course incredibly powerful, uses tools that are often designed to detect these later stages, right? Scans and imaging that show structural change, blood work that shows biochemical change. But many of these earlier signals—the whispers and the yellow lights—these earlier signals of imbalance live in places that the tools of modern medicine can't see. Subtle changes in movement, changes in breathing, shifts in coordination, small compensations. These are the yellow lights. These are the whispers that the system is letting us know. They're the whispers before the screams. And while this is not a line coined towards me, the reality is whoever came up with it is brilliant. It's that when we can listen to the whispers, we don't have to hear the screams. So this process really is one of archeology, of clue finding, of being a detective, right? Multiple things are happening as we're helping people move this backwards, unwind it, unravel it in some ways.

So when someone comes to me with pain, we're not watching the yellow lights appear in real time. Instead, we're reconstructing the pathway that led to the red light. When I'm teaching this to my trainees, I'll often draw a cliff face on a flip chart, and I will show water at the bottom of that cliff face, and then I'll show how people in their car will drive along the cliff face and will bypass all these yellow lights.

Proverbial roads down to the beach that they could have taken. Instead, they go right off the cliff and into the water 'cause they blow by all these things, and they, even when someone's in red and their body is screaming at them, they keep driving because human beings are incredibly ambitious, determined to get to where they wanna go.

So when someone comes to work with me, oftentimes they have no idea what these yellow lights are, these whispers are, and the beauty of movement, movement allows us to reconstruct the pathway because movement reveals things that pain alone cannot explain. Movement shows where a system is compensating, where load is being avoided, where breathing changes, where coordination really narrows, where we're gripping, embracing, where we check out.

So as we work through this, as we uncover and recognize the way that somebody moves and breathes, we're really reading the traces that earlier signals have left behind. What's particularly fascinating about this is that understanding change in this way is not unique to movement. Many traditional systems of medicine have described similar progressions for centuries.

When we look at Ayurveda, the Indian form of medicine, Ayurveda teaches that disease does not begin when symptoms appear. There are stages before that that imbalance begins subtly. Digestion shifts, sleep changes. Energy fluctuates. Tension patterns appear long before something becomes diagnosable.

Ayurveda pays attention to these early disturbances, not just the disease itself, 'cause many times the early disturbances arise before the disease actually comes on. Chinese medicine describes a similar process through the idea of qi, and there's a common saying where QE goes, structure follows first.

The flow changes, then function changes, eventually structure changes. Modern neuroscience describes another version of the same phenomenon. It talks about pattern recognition, interoception, and neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to update its internal maps based on what it perceives in the body. Each of these arenas, Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, modern neuroscience, they're all different maps, but really, really it's the same terrain.

Across all of these systems, one theme consistently appears: awareness changes the trajectory. Some call it discernment, some emphasize listening to the body's signals, some refer to it as improving interoception and updating motor maps, but the reality is here is whatever you call it, change begins when someone can perceive something they couldn't have perceived before.

I hear it all the time when I'm working with people. Clients will say, wow, I didn't know that I was holding my breath. Who knew that I was pushing off with my foot in order to do this? I did not know my ribs were moving as I raised my arms overhead. And these awarenesses are powerful because once awareness increases, our systems has a new option.

We can't change what we're aware of, but when we are, absolutely we can change.

This is why something that appears structural can sometimes begin to unwind. And in a previous episode, I talked a bit about kyphosis, and I've been sharing this with a number of my trainees right now, because I'm working with a client right now who, after three sessions, her kyphosis really started to shift dramatically. And for me, for my client, or the trainees I'm sharing this with, it's all really quite gobsmacking because the reality is anytime any person, any client,

any trainee goes through change, it's awesome because it's very unexpected and it's entirely cool.

It's not simply this biomechanical Newtonian physics change; they are fundamentally shifting throughout their being in the process. Right? When we look at kyphosis, so many people assume that it's purely structural, that bones change shape, and the only options are strengthening, stretching, or simply accepting it as permanent.

And I'm not saying that there are some kyphosis that are not just that. Here's the thing that is happening with my current client, as well as with previous clients. When we look at movement patterns, we often see a longer, broader, more interesting story, and the reality is, if we unwind this, one of the things that have been helping this client of mine is as we help her improve.

Her smaller, more directed joint movement patterns, her breathing starts to shift. She lands in her legs a little bit more. Things begin to soften that didn't need to hold tension. And initially, none of these things felt dramatic for her, but they are yellow lights and she was able to tune into them.

We weren't trying to fix her curve directly, but rather helping to improve movement patterns associated with the pain symptoms that she was having. So as she improved her hip joint movement, as she improved the relationship between her pelvis and her rib cage, her breath started to change and she just settled through her system.

So we didn't force any structure to change like, oh, just stand taller, pull the shoulders back, but rather because the underlying pattern that had been supporting the structure had begun to change and it was able to be integrated.

One of the things that she said to me recently was. It's when I can land back into my legs and my feet that I can feel the shift happen further up the chain.

That's a great example of a pattern changing. A pattern changing very, very consciously of recognizing the response of the new neuromuscular movement pattern.

The interesting thing, when we look at this process of change across all of the systems that I've mentioned—Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, neuroscience—the practitioner's role is also similar. The very best practitioners, whether they are in Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, or a neuroscience, the best practitioners are not chasing symptoms.

The best practitioners are helping their clients see the patterns and then, out of seeing the patterns, recognizing how they can keep unraveling them. A great example of this is when I see a person for their first one-on-one session with me, or even in my group classes. I'll let them know when their pain goes down or their symptoms change or something starts to get better.

In that first session, I let them know that this is only temporary. This pattern is new, and the older pattern has a longer staying time, or a stain has more endurance, let's call it, so it will come

back because the groove pattern is just more grooved. The new pattern is like learning how to walk again.

It's gonna take a little bit of time, which is why my private series are three months, 'cause it takes some time to ingrain that new pattern.

But I say to my client, to my trainees, what I'd like you to notice is how long this relief lasts. How long do you feel this structural shift persist? See if you can notice. As it starts to change, what else begins to happen? In this way, they begin to see the pattern earlier. They begin to recognize the yellow lights or the whispers toward that red or scream.

They learn to listen earlier for imbalance and what is driving that imbalance. They get to observe coordinating patterns.

When a trainee or a client can do this, and they can do it remarkably well when given the tools, they then communicate on their next visit, okay, this is what I noticed. I had three hours of relief or one day of relief, or three days of relief, and then this is what I noticed happen. In some cases, they did a program that I had given to them, some cases they didn't.

Doesn't matter. We take all of that as the data, look at it all and go, okay, so now how do we help this last a little bit longer? So if it was three hours, how about four? Three days, how about four? One week, how about one more? And the entire time, that person is paying attention, tuning in, recognizing when those subtle signals are letting them know.

Now someone might be listening to this and saying, okay, so you must have a very unique set of people. And sure, I'll take that because my clients and trainees are awesome. And I would say that so many people are not taught this. I mean, I was teaching my kids at the age of four and five. At four and five, I was teaching my kids how to feel their body, how to communicate the language of their symptoms.

So if I'm teaching my kids at four and five years old and still today, upwards towards nine, and I've got the background, I have, think about environments where they don't have that background. It's very easy to shove things aside in the name of politeness and not causing a ruckus, of just not getting in the way.

It's so easy to shut down the whispers in the yellow lights, and I believe that people are hungry for it because I believe that intuitively people know this to be true. They just need someone to help them tune in and to name the things that they innately know are true for them. And you give a little bit of this to a client and they really run with it.

A great example of this is a CEO client that I worked for a number of years, and he had a condition, physiological condition, that had him getting sick on a very regular basis. He had a doctor who said, you know something? Your job is really not being helpful for you. In fact, if you keep at the job, it might kill you.

But this fellow had no desire to shift his job. He really wanted to figure out how to stay in his work and how to also get better. And I said to him, I mean, I'm no doctor. I am a yoga teacher. I'm a Bachelor of science of kinesiology. I can certainly help you become aware. I can certainly help you shift some of the patterning.

Discover what that pattern-y means for you. And over a period of time, he was able to learn and recognize what the yellow lights for him were to the point where he stopped getting sick nearly as regularly as he had in the past. The amount of sickness that he experienced over the years we worked together was so incredibly low compared to when we weren't working together. And while he did resist initially at really listening closely, what he did gain was he could sense when he could push, when he needed had to rest, and when he had to stop. And as a CEO of a mid-sized company, this was really, really important.

There's a lot of work to do, a lot of people to engage with. For him to tune in that much more consistently to what his system was saying, he was that much more effective in his work. That's what he said back to me. So the reality is, is when we're able to tune in, we've got so much more bandwidth to be able to work with those yellow lights.

Just because a yellow light comes up doesn't mean you stop. It's a message for you about what maybe you need to do next.

In the work that I do, movement is both diagnostic and intervention. Movement reveals where awareness is missing, where a system is compensating, and where new patterns can begin to emerge. Once people begin to notice these whispers, these yellow lights in the system, that's when change becomes possible.

As we know, modern care is very good, very good at identifying red lights, and meaningful change often begins when we learn how to notice the yellow lights, the whispers before the shout.

So what can you do for your own self? Number one, remember that we can't change anything we're not aware of. So the first step really is becoming aware.

Begin to notice when shoulders start to creep up to your ears, when you weight shift when standing in line, maybe a breathing pattern change when you begin to hold your breath. Something in this morning's group class that I was teaching was notice when you're adding load, how your breath changes, and do you brace with your breath?

Choose a load where bracing with your breath isn't needed, but you simply breathe. Then notice what occurs or when you're using extraneous tension. Doing any kind of movement, whether it's weightlifting, yoga, Pilates, anything else, that extraneous tension, is it really needed? And consider doing the exact same movement with five or 10% less effort and still have the same result.

Now, how do you move? And now what do you recognize?

This is a starting point to simply observe your own signals before symptoms escalate. A quick story related to this. There was a period of time when I was teaching a lot of group classes, group therapeutic classes, back in the Earlyish to mid two thousands, between 2003 and 2010. A number of people coming to see me had rheumatoid arthritis and other autoimmune conditions, and this was probably some of the coolest feedback I received from people is that what they noticed is that the flares associated with the autoimmune condition started to fade because they started to recognize the whispers before the flare.

They were able to tune in to the physiological changes and the, and what was contributing to them. What they were I learning from a movement pattern perspective, they were able to integrate into other arenas of their life. And that to me is powerful. Did they still have rheumatoid arthritis or other autoimmune condition?

Yes, of course. But how they were living inside of that diagnosis in their body entirely, entirely different. So to bring this to a close, I think the key here that's most important, that I'd love for you to take away is that change is possible fundamentally. And it starts with understanding that before the symptoms appeared, there were quieter signals to let you know.

You probably didn't know them, you probably weren't aware of them 'cause they're very quiet, and it's often not until we get to the scream we can begin to ponder and look at them, first by gaining the necessary relief to make us feel more comfortable, but then to recognize what contributed to that relief.

And likely you'll find some of those yellow lights and whispers right there. That's where you get to work. That's where the gold is. As you begin to notice these signals earlier and earlier, and earlier and earlier, you're literally working with dimmer and dimmer and dimmer yellow lights, quieter and quieter and quieter signals, clearer and clearer and clearer signals, which means your body mind has the opportunity to change direction long before the system has to scream or hit a red light again. That is where real transformation begins.

If this is interesting for you and you would love to explore this from a movement perspective, I've got two opportunities for you.

The first is for those who have pain and what I'm saying really resonates with you. Please check out my multi-week series Therapeutic Yoga for Shoulders and Hips, where you can find at **functionalsynergy.com/shoulderships**. We begin this next series April 2026, and if you are a professional yoga teacher, a massage therapist, physical therapist, anyone who wants to take these ideas into their practice and really help people to facilitate change, utilizing movement and breath and stillness as the driving force, ease as the driving force.

Check out my therapeutic yoga intensive. You can learn more over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**. I would love to share with you what I know to work so well and help you have the same results with your own clients. Until next time.

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Hey, did this episode resonate with you? Are you a professional who wants to work with your clients and really help facilitate some big change, helping them reduce and eliminate physical pain and shift up the level of awareness that they experience in their bodies? Check out the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**.