

Ep. #369 - It's Not A Muscle Problem - Understanding Compensation Patterns



Full Episode Transcript

With your host:

Susi Hately

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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 so glad that you're here, because today I've got a special treat. Today I am working through an article that was recently shared with me. It was originally published on CNN earlier in April, and I had a kick reading it. It's not my article, but anything that talks about muscle compensation, I love to read, especially when it's on a mainstream media source.

Because if more people are talking about compensation patterns, we're heading in the direction, I think, that will help a lot of people. As you know, if you've been following this podcast for any length of time, a key piece of what I do to help people reduce and eliminate pain is help them to become aware of, and then to reduce, their compensation patterns.

It's really the fuel source for someone's retraining process. So when I read an article about compensation patterns, I get really excited, especially when it's posted on a mainstream media outlet. Now, one of the things I'm doing with talking about this article is there's aspects of this article I disagree with, and I wanna first start off.

I'm not saying that the author is wrong, because there's lots of different ways of helping people with compensation patterns. I just don't agree with the way that she's doing it. It doesn't mean that she's wrong. It means I've got a different view, and I'm gonna go through why I have that different view.

I have a tendency to think that when people are writing things, they have their opinion. They have their opinion for a reason. They obviously get results with the opinion that they have, and I want to show an alternative to that so that you, as you're listening, can come up with your own opinion, because ultimately, truly, to help anybody heal, what I'm helping someone do is to come to their own opinion about their bodies.

Right. Even the things that I'm sharing, people will disagree with at times. And for a client, I ultimately want them to know what's right for them, because that is the greatest opportunity for healing them, tuning into what their body specifically needs. They take what works and filter out the rest. So that's what I'm doing here.

Okay, I'm gonna model that. Alright, so let's dig into it. I wanna start off with a basic summary of the article. Again, the link for the article is in the show notes. And then I'm gonna summarize

really briefly where I think the article is missing or there's a gap. And then I'll dig into more about what I think works really well in the article.

And I'll dig in more into where the gap is, what you can do about it, how I work, and then you can take all of that and form your own opinion, right? So let's dig in. So the article explains that many aches and pains come from compensation patterns, where some muscles overwork because others aren't doing their job.

These patterns develop from things like sitting posture or old injuries, and over time, the overworking muscles fatigue while the underused ones weaken, creating a cycle of tension and pain. You can start to spot this by noticing where you feel effort during movement. And the solution the article offers is to slow down, improve breathing, and restore mobility so movement is more balanced.

What I think the article misses is that I don't see compensation as a muscle problem. I see it as a coordination pattern. So there's two key things there that are important, is that it's not a muscle problem, it's a coordination pattern. I don't even see compensation as a problem. It's a strategy, it's a habit.

It's not something to fix. So even if you stretch or strengthen the right areas, a lot of times, the underlying pattern can stay the same, and symptoms can return. And it's a reason I think that people who tackle compensations in this way, and it doesn't work, and their symptoms do return, it's because they're not solving the actual problem.

So let's dig into this a little bit more. What the article gets really right, and why it resonates for me, is that compensation is real. The body will find ways to keep people moving. So whether it's someone's ambition is overriding their patients, or because they've been injured and they need to find a way to get to the next point, like they've injured themselves and they've been out for a run and they need to limp their way back home, or whether they are someone due for, say, a surgery, like a hip surgery or knee surgery and they're limping, the body will find a way just to kind of keep people moving.

Compensation shows up as overworking somewhere else. Our system, our neurodynamic, neuro, neuromechanical system, will borrow from another area in order to make ourselves move forward. And yes, we can start to see many of these patterns if we slow down. And yes, breathing absolutely has a huge impact.

And there's a key line in the article, that like muscles taking on extra work will fatigue faster, while muscles that are meant to do the job will weaken further. So all of that, there's a lot of agreement that is present there. This is the cycle many people will recognize: overwork, fatigue, more compensation, more symptoms.

So where I think the article really misses is the article stops at, okay, notice it, fix the muscle, improve mobility, breathe better. In my experience, that's not how change actually happens and has sustainability. And here's the gap. The ideas that are presented here treat compensation like a muscle problem, and it's not.

It's a coordination pattern. It's a strategy. So it's not so much that there's tight hip flexors and weak glutes, although those two things might be present. It's more about how we're dissipating, transferring, and absorbing load through our system. And it's why, as I've mentioned earlier, that why people who do exercises and stretch the thing and strengthen the thing and do all the things that they're meant to be doing, it's why they have nothing actually changing in the long term.

The article also doesn't show people how to actually work with the pattern, partly because they're looking at it as a problem. So while the article gives self-checks and general corrections, it's not giving a way to really see and feel the pattern that's unfolding in real time. And so when I'm working with someone, I'm helping them to reveal their neuromuscular neurodynamic pattern layer by layer, piece by piece.

The other thing I find misses in this article is it assumes that awareness equals change, and I think this perhaps might be the biggest miss. Slowing down does help you notice, for sure. Noticing is fundamental. Awareness is the key ingredient. Because you are aware, it doesn't mean you have clarity for how to actually intervene, and without that, you're not gonna develop better connection with your body.

And you're also not gonna do or perceive any sort of feedback between your mind and your body. Because remember, like in order to create movement, our body moves, and it sends a signal to the brain about how we moved, and the brain takes that information and then spits out more direction on how to move.

And so there's this, we call it the sensory motor loop, but if we're not actually sensing and tuning into that, beyond just, oh, I've got awareness, I'm noticing something, then the change isn't going to actually happen. So things to consider are: what do you do with what you notice, and how do you change it without forcing it?

And how do you build capacity so there's more stamina, so it holds? And those are three fundamental questions that I'm working with when I'm working with my clients, and also helping my trainees get the results with their own clients. So while the article is kind of digging into, you know, getting people to try to fix what they're feeling, what they're missing is that what they're actually feeling is the result of how the system is coordinating.

What they're feeling is the result of the pattern. So they're kind of going at the process in a slightly awkward way. Now, again, I'm not saying that it won't work for some people. Obviously, it does work, or it wouldn't, this article wouldn't be published. There are people who really benefit from addressing a weak muscle and stretching out a tight muscle, or what's perceived to be weak and tight.

But then there's a whole slew of other people who have tried to do that and it hasn't worked, and this is a key reason why. So if that's your case, if this is what's happening for you or for your clients, this is where my work comes in. Compensation is not the problem. Compensation is the body solving a problem.

And I know that seems sort of strange, because compensation isn't actually solving the problem, but in a way it is, right? It's finding a workaround to get us from point A to point B, and that's the solution that our body mind is trying to solve for. It does work for a period of time until it doesn't. So if you're not interested in correcting a muscle, but rather changing the conditions that created the compensation, that's the work we get to do here.

If you are looking for a class specifically for that, then come and join the Therapeutic Yoga for shoulders and hips class that we just, just, just began, and you'll really get a good feel of how compensation isn't the problem. Compensation is a strategy, it's a pattern, it's habitual, and we get to retrain that pattern by first noticing, becoming aware.

Taking that noticing and awareness into actual clarity about what's working, what's not working, and then enabling better connection and overall better internal feedback. So we're coming at this from an embodied place, from inward outward. This is what helps facilitate relief. This is what helps facilitate retraining in small, precise, and very, very deliberate ways.

As a summary, to wrap this up, compensation patterns aren't random. They are your body's way of solving a problem, and the issue really, in my mind, isn't that something is weak or tight, but rather how the body is transferring, dissipating, absorbing load. The way thing is being shared within our system.

And yes, slowing down can help you. Noticing can help you, but noticing doesn't change it. Change begins when you actually work on the pattern itself, using your breath as a guide. And then we can recognize symptoms as messengers, not the problem. And we begin a better, more effective retraining process for how our system is coordinating, right?

We're shifting up our motor control and coordinating patterns, and that's really, really where things begin to shift, and that's when they become more sustainable, because we're playing with this from both, like we're feeling this, as opposed to getting into maybe getting mad at why the body's not cooperating.

And I just need to get this darn glute to fire. That glute will fire when the compensation patterns settle out. We don't need to get the glute firing in order to get the compensation pattern settling out in the way that I look at things. Again, it's why you can do all the things. You can do your glute bridges, you can do all the things around your glutes, and still not make change, because the glute not turning on is not the glutes fault.

It's the way the habitual patterning is an idea. To kind of bring this to light, and I was thinking about this as I was pondering the article, is I've been teaching my 9-year-old twins tennis. They're in the very beginning stages where we're delighted that the ball gets over the net, and they're starting to learn that the lines on the court are, you keep the ball inside of it, as opposed to try to get it outside of it.

And they're starting to get some really good hand-eye coordination. And there's some, they got some good power on the ball now, but we're still in that very, very fundamental place of like,

okay, so in order to play the game of tennis, what needs to happen? Okay, well, we need to get the ball over the net by way of hitting it with a racket.

That's the ultimate process to play tennis. Do you notice how inside of that I did not make a single mention about a muscle? You need to do this with that muscle, this with this muscle, this with that muscle. No. What we're doing is we're trying to break the activity down into its small component parts to do the goal of getting the ball over the net and in the lines.

The reason I bring this up is that sometimes I think when we are talking a lot about get this muscle working and engaging, and get this muscle more mobilized or released or letting go, it makes the process very intellectual. And for some people, it's probably the right thing, and the people that I see, and maybe you listening to this podcast, it's not necessarily the right thing.

There's another thing that's needed, and that is in addition to, or instead of, purely an intellectual process of do this to the glute or do this to the piriformis, or do that to the lats or do this to the QL, it's can we just notice what happens when we move the leg bone in the pelvis, or when we rotate what's happening with the chin or the rib cage?

How is your breath moving right now? Do you see the difference there? When we talk about specific segments, I can see how someone moves, and I've directed or guided the client to feel how those segments move internally. So we've got something that collectively we both can perceive, our way: me being able to see them, being able to feel, and in some cases, if they're on camera, they can see it too.

Whereas when we're talking purely about glutes and piriformis and QL and all that, I am relying on them to know the muscle, to understand its movement, and where they feel the sensation of said muscle. I'm making the assumption, and so are they, that that's the actual muscle that's engaging.

Because the reality is, is everywhere where there's a muscle, there's more than one. There's layers of muscle. It's like when someone says, I'm stretching my piriformis. It's like, okay, that's what you feel, and there's also layers of muscles in the neighborhood of the piriformis. So is it specifically the piriformis that's being stretched right now?

The little answer is likely not. So it becomes a little bit tricky to say this is specifically doing this to that muscle. Nobody can actually measure that objectively. We're going off of purely sensory experience, which as the practitioner, I can't see.

So it's one reason I tend not to utilize that sort of language with people, because there's a big blind spot for me to actually be able to guide them. 'Cause if they say, oh yeah, yeah, I feel it there, okay, great. And it's not that I don't trust my client, but I would rather have more objective information that both my client and I can follow.

Because someone can take the ankle to the knee into a figure four stretch. They can feel what they would say is a piriformis. But what I'm seeing is that when they moved into the movement,

their pelvis moved, their ribcage moved, their breath got held, so they might be stretching something.

The way they got there was full of compensation, which means they might be stretching the thing they want to or not, but the underlying pattern stays the same. Again, it's a great example about why it's important, I think, to work with the pattern and not the symptom.

And I highlight the story of teaching my children tennis because the way that I'm teaching them tennis aligns with the way that I teach my client, my trainees, about movement. I don't need to tell someone that in order to bring the leg up into a figure four stretch, these muscles need to be working.

Because the reality is, is all we need to do is move the leg bone in deflection, and then rotate that thing and bring the ankle onto the knee. We all can see that. They can perceive that. They can see that, and we can see if it's actually happening or if it's not.

That's the fundamentals to changing patterning, and when you change patterning, muscles shift as well. It's all where we're focusing and directing our attention, and it comes from a place that's internal and not simply intellectual.

It's more embodied, not just mental thought process.

If this is interesting to you, if this is resonating for you, and you wanna dig in more to this idea of patterning change and how to see it as a teacher, how to feel it, if you're someone with pain and you're kind of going, yep, I think this makes sense for me, then do check out Therapeutic Yoga for shoulders and hips.

As I mentioned earlier, we just began this series, and I have three options. You can take it by recording only. You can take it by recording or the live presentation and actually work with me in a customized way between each session, and you can also take it as a professional, where we have an extra call, where we dig into how we apply these to certain special situations, how to articulate some of the queuing.

What I'm really kind of going for from a teacher's professional's perspective and all of that is on the information page over at **functionalsynergy.com/shoulderships**. I'd love for you to join me. Take care, and we'll see you next time.