

Ep. #370 - Become a Movement Detective:  
Rethinking Neck Pain



Full Episode Transcript

With your host:

Susi Hatley

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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.

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Welcome and welcome back. I'm so glad that you're here because today I am talking about the neck. I've spoken about the neck and neck pain before in this podcast many times, but today I wanna bring in two ideas that really are central to how I work. It's the idea of becoming a movement detective and the notion of functional synergy.

My hope is to widen the way that you think about neck pain, whether you're living with it yourself or you're working with someone who is. So, for a moment, I'd love for you to step out of the role of being a patient or a client, and if you are a teacher or a yoga therapist, to step out of the role of a practitioner who tries to fix a problem, and instead, I invite you into becoming a movement detective.

When we think about a detective, they're not walking into a crime scene and seeing a broken vase, trying to glue it back together. They notice the open window, a scuff mark on the rug, and a chair out of place. They look at what happened and what didn't happen, and how the pieces fit together. They're looking for the story behind the mess, and interestingly, oftentimes in rehabilitation and in therapeutic movement work.

The opposite is often done. We point to the pain and try to fix it right away. Stretching, rubbing, releasing, adjusting, and while none of these are inherently wrong, there is a distinction, especially in arenas of persistent pain, and that is where the pain is, is not necessarily the problem. In my work, I'm not actually looking for broken parts.

I'm looking for relationships, and I wanna emphasize that I did not use the word broken in front of relationships. I don't actually think relationships are broken.

The body is not a machine with one squeaky hinge. It's a living system of interconnected parts, and when one part stops doing its job well, another part takes over. It's a really creative strategy and pattern to get a job done. Ensure that part that's taking over is working harder and longer and in ways that wasn't designed to do.

And yes, it gets tired and less efficient and more tense, and it might start to become more fatigue, and another part starts to compensate. But the reality is, is that this is all a creative strategy to, like I said, get a job done. And it's fundamental to understand this in order to solve the problem you wanna solve.

When we recognize that compensation builds upon compensation and builds upon compensation, we recognize that we are incredible habit-making machines. This is where the idea of functional synergy comes in. Synergy is when a system is working well together, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

There's an efficiency, more load is shared. The way that forces move through the body, being absorbed, dissipated, transferred, is smooth. There's more distribution of effort overall. When it comes to working with the neck, we'll see how the blade, the arm, the ribcage, and the pelvis are all working more or less together.

The neck's not overworking. And then, when synergy begins to break down, and we're talking about neck in this conversation, the neck might be the one that starts to get blamed. It's the one that's screaming, it's visible, it's loud.

Really, what's going on behind the scenes? What's contributing to the neck being loud is what's really important to address. When I'm working with neck pain, initially, I like to think about two roots: the shoulder girdle and the pelvic girdle. And if I wanna understand why someone's neck is responding in the way that it is, I need to understand how those roots are working too, not only individually, so what makes up the shoulder girdle and how that shoulder girdle is functioning, and what makes up the pelvic girdle and how that pelvic girdle is functioning.

But how those two are working together, how they're communicating. And one of the things I'm looking for is what I like to call stickiness or rattiness or gunness. And the reason I use those very non-technical terms is because that is what they can feel like for my client. I'm interested in the somatic expression that comes from them.

So I might be looking to see if movement is smooth, or how the arm bone moves in the socket, or how the blade moves, or what goes on with the ribcage, or the way the leg bone moves in the pelvis, and how the pelvis moves relative to the ribcage. And the client is speaking back to me about what they feel, which could be gunky, held, stuck, sticky, concrete, ratchety.

When there is that sticky, congested, ratchety, held sort of tension-based feeling, however a person describes it, it's pretty clear that our nervous system is borrowing from somewhere else in order to get a job done. And in the context of this episode, it's often the neck.

So the neck helps. It helps lift an arm, it helps pull, it helps heave. It does work that it's not designed to do, so it makes sense that over time there's more tension, more fatigue, and less efficiency.

So people are really surprised when we begin to look at these two roots and discover what's going on, because again, so much of this compensatory patterning happens under our level of awareness, but bit by bit, piece by piece, people recognize the relationships, they can feel the relationships, how the arm bone moves in the shoulder socket as the arm goes overhead.

Does it actually move, or does the neck wanna get involved? Does the rib cage wanna lift? Is there a bracing pattern somewhere when it really ought to be just the arm bone moving in the

socket? Same is with the movement of the hip. I love to use a movement like lying on the ground with legs up the wall, a movement that, for lots of people, can be very relaxing.

And then I ask them, all right, so you've got your right foot on the wall. Let's raise that right foot off the wall. And they feel it in their neck, and they're super surprised. So when I ask them to move their leg without moving their neck or using their neck or bracing in their neck, they're stunned to notice that they can't.

They're also amazed that they can't because they're starting to see the relationship of why their neck wants to work the way it does. And as we begin to restore function back to the pelvis, back to the way the hips are meant to move, and back to the way the shoulders are meant to move, the neck doesn't have to do the work anymore, and that's where real change begins to happen.

Now, all is fine and good. It sounds very smooth, simple, a process that people can move through swimmingly, but there is an obstacle or a point of resistance.

Oftentimes, when people are learning and discovering this process of noticing where else in their body they are moving, or not moving where the neck wants to kick in, they often will hit a wall. They'll notice that in order to actually move their leg bone without their neck moving, in order to move their shoulder without their neck moving, the amount of movement in either of those joints is really small or a lot smaller than they thought.

They'll say something like, but hold on a second, I can move further. I have more range. It's just my neck. And here is what is fundamental and key here. Yes, you do have more range, and that is what is awesome. And that range is actually a compensatory range.

You have the range. It's full of compensation. If you wanna continue to have that range, you will continue to have the compensation. If you want to have range without the compensation, then we get to start here, and there's an added bonus. If you continue to move in the range that you have with the compensation, the likelihood of your neck pain remaining is pretty high.

If you want your neck pain to start to fade away, we need to retrain the habit, and the retraining process starts with a smaller range without that compensation. When I outline it that way, it's still a little bit frustrating, but the good news is, is here they actually have the range. They have the range.

It's just neuromuscularly, the coordination pattern is just not smooth or efficient, and all we need to do is improve that, and I can, I can guide someone through that piece by piece in a very straightforward way. I just need to help them attend their attention and, as they do it, even in one session, and they start to feel the relief, and oftentimes the range also improves within like five or six repetitions.

Then they start to get it. They're like, oh, my range is actually improving and my neck's not sore. I'm like, yes, exactly, and it becomes very straightforward. So, to summarize that point, a way to think about it is you've got the range. The question is, how are you getting there?

If your neck grips and your ribs flare and your breath holds, well, that's not a very pure range of motion. It's very compensated. And so, when I'm asking people to move less, I'm not taking range away. I'm helping retrain the pattern. And as we retrain the pattern, we improve the overall coordination, we improve the communication between the brain and the rest of the body, and that's how range improves.

That's how tension reduces in a really smooth, connected, and contained way.

So from here then, how do we get to pay attention as a movement detective as we build this idea of functional synergy? When someone comes in and they have pain, that's the scream. That's where the movement currently is pointing towards. And if we wanna help reduce that, we get to feel for the whispers.

Whispers are quieter than screams. Whispers are what we notice in the smaller range. Screams currently are available in the larger range. So when we start to recognize the compensatory whispers in the smaller range, we can adjust there, and then we don't have to go into screams further along, and these moments really matter.

So what are examples of whispers? Does your breath start to get held? Does it start to get grippy? Do you go a certain range and then you think, Ugh, I really should go further? Does your effort increase? Does your tongue reach the top of your mouth and plaster itself against the top of your mouth? Do your eyes start to grip? Anywhere else in your body?

Start to hold tension that's not actually needed for the movement. And then ba, ba bit, you create a shift. You notice what changed. You move again. You notice what changed. You start to notice the quality change, and you repeat from there, and the familiarity grows.

So let's circle this back. The neck is not actually the problem, it's the part that's letting us know there is a problem, and to simply quiet the neck, we're missing why it had to speak in the first place. And when you can understand and see the pattern and help to regain synergy, then you start to change it.

So the next time you feel tension in your neck, take a pause and ask what else is involved? Where am I borrowing from? What happens if I move in a way that doesn't involve my neck? Now what's present?

Remember, if stretching your neck fix neck pain, you'd already be outta pain. So perhaps there's another way.

If you wanna dig into this more with me, if this idea of becoming a movement detective, of building functional synergy resonates with you, come join me for power of pure movement, unwind and unravel the neck. It's happening on May 4th and 11th. All of it's recorded, so you can't make the times, you can always take the course by replay.

Learn more over at [functionalsynergy.com/neck](https://functionalsynergy.com/neck). Take care, and we'll see you next time.