

Ep. #371 - Muscles Vs. Segments



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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.

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With this episode, I wanna get into a concept briefly that I'll dig into future episodes in more depth, but it's an arena of how we work as yoga therapists or with teachers, ASHI professionals, and helping our clientele reduce and eliminate pain. That can create a lot of confusion. And I've been talking more about this in certification and in my intensive programs, and it's landing really well for people as we work through it and really embody it.

The problem really is this. Most of us have been trained to solve a muscle problem. Something is tight, something is weak, something isn't engaging. So we stretch it, strengthen it, and try to activate it. And while there's nothing inherently wrong with that, muscles do matter, there is a gap, and the gap is this: we actually can't see muscle engagement.

Like really, unless we have sensors on the skin, we can't really see it. Sure, I can feel things, absolutely. And I can see on a person around their hip when that gets firm or around their shoulders, and I can make an assumption what's happening there. The reality is, there are multiple layers of tissue; to say it's exactly that muscle is not entirely accurate.

And when we start naming things based on that, we're not really being that precise; we're more so estimating. And while sometimes that estimation is close enough, sometimes it's not. And when it's not, people end up doing all the right things but not getting the results they actually expect. So what I wanna do today with this episode is to help really see what's actually available, because when we can see more clearly, we don't have to guess as much. And when we don't have to guess as much, then things become a whole lot simpler.

Here's where I think the confusion starts. Let me show you how this actually plays out, because this really isn't theory; it's what I see every day when I train teachers and I work with my clientele. I had a client say to me not that long ago, "I've been really working my glutes, but they're just not working. My pelvic floor just grips." And that makes a lot of sense based off of how we've been trained to think. If something's not working, go to the muscle and then try and fix the muscle. But the reality is, it actually wasn't about her glute or her pelvic floor when we looked actually at how she was moving.

What we really saw was what was going on with her rib cage and her shoulder blades, and how her system was coordinating around that. And when we could change those relationships, her glutes began to work better and her pelvic floor stopped gripping. The key here is we didn't go after the muscles at all, but rather we were looking at the segments the muscles connect with, not even directly neighboring, but we're in relationship. And here is really where people get stuck, is they keep doing more to try and solve this problem they think is the problem, and their

system just keeps coordinating the same way. So what do we do about this when we think about it in this way?

We could work at getting better at guessing muscles and refining our sensory awareness. But even at that, whether you have a strengthening sensation or a stretching sensation, there are multiple layers of muscle tissue in any area. So again, we'd still be guessing.

What I like to do instead is working with something that's actually observable, something that is tangible, and I mentioned it just a moment ago: segments. Segments are something that both you and your client can see and perceive in real time. Muscles attach to segments, and segments are what actually move.

For example, your arm bone moves in the shoulder socket, the leg bone moves in the pelvis. When you rotate, sometimes that pelvis is quiet and the ribcage moves. Sometimes the rib cage is quiet and the pelvis moves, depend on the intent of the movement. When we understand what the movement we're doing is requiring, we can then assess: are the segments doing that which are required?

We can see it. A client can feel it or learn to feel it. We can both track it. And when we start there, we remove a huge amount of ambiguity, because instead now of asking, well, is the glute working, we can begin by asking, well, what's actually moving here? Why is it the glute even wants to not work in the first place?

We start really digging into three important questions that I'm asking every time I watch someone move, and that is: given the intent of this movement, what is moving that should be, what is moving that shouldn't be, and what isn't moving that should? By digging into these questions, we're no longer working in theory, we're an observation. And this is where things really can shift quite quickly, because once you can see segmental movement, you can't really unsee it.

You really start to see when the rib cage is driving something that the hip should be doing. You start to notice when the pelvis compensates, when it really should be the leg bone moving. You start to notice when the shoulder girdle is taking over for something that another part of the body really should be doing.

What's interesting is when you guide your instruction and guidance in this way, your client really notices it too. They can put their hands on their body, they can feel what's happening. And the beauty of this is, no longer are they relying on you to tell them what's going on in their own body; they're telling you what's going on in their own body, and they're participating in the process.

They're enhancing their proprioception, not just sensation in a vague sense, but really a clear sense of where their body is in space. And this is something I've seen over and over and over again, as people who have persistent pain, what they need to grow, and when they do grow it, so much changes, is their proprioceptive awareness.

We've already seen this in the research with folks with hyper hypermobility; when they improve their proprioception, so much begins to change. And I see this across the board with other individuals, hypermobile or not. The key here is we're no longer trying to chase a stretch or feel a burn, but rather we're understanding the relationships of how we move, the essential neurodynamics, how parts are moving in relationship to each other. And when these relationships improve, things change.

Let's make this really practical. Take something like a clamshell, such a classic exercise that is given when there's an area of the glutes that's not engaging as it should. And when it's done well, oh boy, can it work really, really well. But so often, what we see, and the research actually supports this too, is that the hip flexors are engaging way more, and they're driving the movement more.

So often, we see ribs shifting and pelvis is rolling. There's a whole lot happening, really, but very little of it is actually targeting where it really ought to, which is one particular area of the glutes. So then the exercise is labeled as something that's not working.

They conclude, well, my glutes just don't fire, it's just the pattern.

But when you can start to see these segments, it doesn't become, oh, your glutes are just lazy, it's just who you are, it's just the stage of life you're in. You actually can teach them to perceive and then quiet parts of their body that are moving that don't need to move. And then when you do that, all of a sudden, guess what happens?

Those glutes turn on.

There's another piece related to this where people get tripped up: they do things to release a muscle and they feel better. They do things to strengthen a muscle, and it does feel stronger for a bit, but the pattern doesn't actually change, and the tension comes back or the issue returns. While something releases or gets a bit stronger, the coordinating patterns are still the same overall.

When we shift up the way our segments are relating to each other, when we quiet the things that aren't needed for the movement, when we continue to foster the things that are, that is when we change, ultimately change, the underlying patterning. I realize listening to this in some ways might feel kind of odd or strange, because we have been so trained to go after muscles, even in the growing conversations about compensations.

The compensation patterning is all about a tight muscle or a weak muscle or, uh, this muscle or that muscle, but we need to remember that muscles respond to forces. They really aren't the driving force. It's the full neurodynamic system between nervous system, myofascial system, and skeletal system, and over and over again.

I love the fact that muscles that are telling us that they're tight or weak or locked long or locked short or doing whatever it is that they're doing are simply messengers responding and telling us that there is limitation or dysfunction present. And when we respond at the level of segment and

improve the coordinating patterns between those segments, those muscles just start to come online quite naturally, because the neurodynamics have shifted.

If this is interesting to you, then stay tuned for upcoming episodes. I'm gonna be going more into depth about how it is that I work, still, yes, keeping muscles in mind, but not driving my programming from that place, and digging more into why it is that what I do does work so well for people who are interested in developing their internal sense, in improving their level of proprioception, and, as teachers, getting better and better results.

So come on back. I look forward to sharing with you more about the ways that I work and how I help people reduce and eliminate pain.