

Ep. #388 - When Body-Based Yoga Therapy Meets
Mental Health Work: A Conversation with Functional
Synergy Graduate Austin Chason



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 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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Susi: All right, welcome, and welcome back. I am really glad that you're here today because I have a graduate from the Yoga Therapy Certification program, and we are going to have a chat today about what it is like post-grad. And are these principles that were taught, do they actually work? For all the things that I say, right, Austin? For all the things that I say about helping people to reduce and eliminate physical pain, like does it does it does it actually pan out? Does it actually pan out for all the things I say about having like building up a client base and actually making a living? Is it really true? Like, is it really true? So, we are going to be talking with Austin today, Austin Chason. And we are going to be talking about his journey post-certification, even pre-certification. We'll give you the before story, the during story, the after story. But also, what I think is most interesting is that, as many people know, I am a body-based person, where my primary focus is helping my clientele reduce and eliminate physical pain. And that's what I'm teaching inside of the certification. Now, we we touch on the other layers and the other koshas, and Austin has really incorporated that into a much broader context. And so, this is why I'm super excited for you to hear from him. So, Austin, welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

Austin: Thank you, Susi. Always good to be here with you, and share the things that you have taught me, and how I have been learning and to apply them in the rest of the world. If you don't mind, I literally received a piece of feedback today from a yoga class that I taught, and I'd like to start there.

Susi: Yeah, let's go.

Austin: "I've been having foot, ankle, and knee pain for the past week, and after this yoga session, the pain reduced dramatically. I didn't realize my hip mobility connects so much with those areas, too. Thank you so much." This was a group class that I taught in an intensive outpatient programming setting. I never met this person before. They just popped into this session one day. That's what they learned, because what you have taught me is so fundamental to how I teach, it has changed every aspect of how I approach movement, working with bodies, working with minds as well. And so, when I got that feedback this morning, I was like, I have to share this. I knew that I was coming onto here.

Susi: Really, really cool. Let's give context to people. So, the end story currently is that you are working—just really briefly, cause we'll dig into it in a bit more—but really briefly, where are you working now?

Austin: So, right now, I work in an intensive outpatient programming setting working with mental health. So, high-acuity clients. High-acuity means these individuals have recently attempted suicide or are seriously considering suicide. Some of them are stepped-down care from inpatient programs, and others of them are trying to avoid those inpatient settings. And so, in this outpatient setting, there's three different hours, three days a week that these clients attend. There's a skills for like dialectical behavioral therapy or CBT, and then there's a processing hour where they can get everything off the mind, and then there's the integrative hour, which is either yoga therapy, art therapy, music therapy, depending on the client. And so, I've worked in this setting for about four years now. I've seen about probably like more than 2,000 clients at this point in time. And everything consistently goes back to what Patañjali mentions in the Yoga Sutras about ease and stability. Patañjali says one thing about movement, one thing about asana, and it's that it should be stable and easy, *sthira-sukham asanam*. And from that place, where we start finding stability and ease in the body, we find that the mind also longs and yearns for stability and ease. And so, I've been able to take these physical lessons and then link them into the broader context of how it relates to individuals and their minds. And sometimes it goes the opposite way. Sometimes people need that ease and that stability in the mind first, and then they're able to let the body settle. And so, there's multiple ways in, and it's it's always fascinating working with different groups to see what the needs are and what the most appropriate way in is.

Susi: So, that's the current story, that is Austin today. So, let's hearken back to a before story, because I think, like, a lot of people listening, and we've got people who are teachers, who are interested in becoming therapeutic teachers or yoga therapists, they're considering my program, but there's also non-teachers who listen to this as well, and they're just kind of curious about being what like what the heck other stuff Susi does and the people who work with her. So, let's let's hearken back the before story of the intensive, because that was really the first time that you and I ever met. And so, what brought you to the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive and and and the the kind of what arose from there?

Austin: So, what brought me to the therapeutic intensive, kind of multiple multiple streams here. Uh, the first is I was certified to teach yoga, and I was teaching yoga a little bit. And what I noticed about how our culture talks about yoga is that it's like Advil. Like, "Oh, have you tried yoga? Have you done this? Can you..." Like like, if you're doing yoga, then everything's going to be fine and dandy for you. And I noticed that as I was practicing, that there were a lot of people who one, I did not know how to interact with and help. And two, when I was practicing yoga, I was not getting better. There wasn't a teaching, there was not a mechanism that I could follow that actually helped me to feel at ease and stable in my life. And so, when I found you, I reached out to you almost instantly. And I was like, "I don't know if this sounds weird to—" The email was roughly like this, "I don't know if this sounds weird to you or not, but I feel like there's something missing from yoga teaching, and I'm wondering if you can help me." And then the email I got back was basically like, "You're my people. Come to the intensive." And I was like, "Awesome." And so, I showed up to the intensive, and by that point, I had had low back pain, pretty mod- like not intense low back pain. It didn't get in the way of anything. Every so often it would flare up and I would be not unable to move, but it would be difficult to move around. And after that

intensive, I found ease in that space. And then there were other channels that then opened for me after that intensive. And usually what happens on a healing process, is one thing starts to feel better, and then other things blow up because they need to heal better. And so, my whole life underwent a thorough transformation, right? I stopped looking at relationships that no longer served me. I started recognizing how I was problematic in these relationships, both to my body and to the people around me. I started recognizing the difference between what is useful and what is not useful to me, all because of these mechanisms of looking at how things actually are in this moment, of pulling the awareness back. So, that's where I kind of came into this program from, because before I was there, I recognized that there was a problem. I wasn't able to articulate, I was not able to see what it was that I needed. And then as I did some of the introductory pro- not introductory programs, but the intensive, and I just got to know you a little bit better, there was then this yearning to learn more, this yearning for more stability, this yearning for more um answers on how to actually use yoga to help people heal, both for them and for myself. It's a deeply, deeply personal journey, which I think is what makes yoga therapy different from being a doctor, because you do not have to—you do not have to fix yourself in order to be a doctor. Right, you want a certain amount of stability, but in order to be a yoga therapist, you have to be able to sit with yourself. You have to be able to sit at the center of it all. You have to have an understanding of the yamas and the niyamas. And that's what I think makes this modality a little bit different from other forms of medicine, is because through the act of refinement, through the act of practicing yoga, our presence becomes the medicine.

Susi: Yeah. And it's and it's interesting, because a lot of times when people begin in the process, they don't trust their eyes to see. And I think this happened with you near- near the beginning, where there's, and this is not uncommon at all, is that people are looking for, "Give me the template of the thing that I do for the back pain." And then I say, "Well, there isn't a template for the thing to do for the back pain. Can you see how they're moving?" And then it's like, "But," and then there's this blank, and it's like, "What do you see in terms of the movement?" And there's this process that over the years I've actually started to refine quite a bit of really like, first of all, really recognizing that a lot of yoga teachers and others don't trust what they see. And the idea of becoming present is really trusting your eyes, trusting what you do see, and then acting on what it is that you do see.

Austin: Yeah, it is one of the most difficult lessons to learn. And there's different layers of observation here, as well. There's what we can physically see in other people's bodies, and there's also what we can see and observe within ourselves. And so, applying this principle of what you can see from the physical body to the mental and emotional and spiritual body, the principles are still the same. There is never a clear answer for moving from one place to the next, but there is something that is specific for that individual. And helping to revise our own ability to see, to see movement purely, to understand the connections between arm bone and shoulder socket, leg bone and pelvis, right, helping us, the yoga therapist, to be able to see that is useful, because then we start to see it in ourselves, and then we start to be able to help people in multiple layers through all the different koshas. Well, emotionally, what are you seeing? What is coming up for you emotionally? Right, when you see that there's this exchange that you have with someone, you love this person, you like being around with them, but you feel

alone, that is a different level of seeing. And it takes such a degree of honesty with self, going back to yamas and niyamas, you have to be so honest with yourself about what you are seeing and trusting that honesty. And there's a lot in our culture about yoga being flippant. And I think people who have a serious practice of yoga know that it isn't, but in the cultural zeitgeist, it's like, put on some Lululemon pants, go do some downward-facing dog, and then that's okay. But this deeper layer of yoga really deals with that honesty. And that honesty directly feeds our ability to see. And the more honest we are, the more that we can see, and the more that we see, the more we learn to trust what we see. And then we evolve into this being of presence, which may sound strange and very woo-woo, but going back to this idea that presence is the medicine, because we become clear, we become the reflecting glass, and that presence is what is helpful to people.

Susi: So, walk the listener today on coming into cert, and now you are in outpatient, and I led off this podcast episode and pretty much every other podcast episode except for a few really simply and deliberately speaks about the body. How did you bring body-based teaching, even though we do work with all the koshas inside of the cert program, the lens by which this the teaching initially unfolds is through the body, and yet you're very much working with people through the lens initially mentally and emotionally and spiritually. So, explain a little bit how that transition or that integration or whatever that word is, how that happened.

Austin: Mental illness is something that has been that has surrounded my family for quite some time, and so my mind was always oriented in that direction. And through certification, it was always in the back of my mind. I was working through my own anxieties, my own depression through cert as well, and again, recognizing my ability to see what is fueling these things. And when I graduated from cert, I graduated during COVID, so there wasn't a lot happening to begin with. But as things started opening up in the world, I worked for a chiropractor clinic, I worked for a physical therapy clinic, and I found that those weren't quite appropriate fits for me. Um, I was working with people and I was getting results, but I was unsatisfied with the work. And then I got a position working at a school as a PE teacher, but what they needed was a yoga therapist. So, the official title was PE teacher, but working with kids physically to help them address their underlying mental and emotional issues. All of the kids who I worked well with all had severe mental health diagnoses. And found that I was incredibly successful with this population. And through that work with them, their parents were super satisfied with what I did. The kids themselves, there was this one this one student who I worked with refused to do any work, and but they kept showing up to school every single day. And the administration was like, "Well, we need to kick them out." And I was like, "Hang on, hang on, hang on. They're still showing up. They're getting something valuable from this experience. They just need to be with it for a little bit." And so, just sitting and holding space with this one individual then became medicine for them, and after a couple—and this student had been through a lot—and so after a couple of months, this student then something clicked, something snapped, and straight A's. Straight A's, super active in the community, like community leader at the school itself, and they just kept progressing, and they kept getting better, better, they had a thirst for knowledge. And so, I realized with that student, and then with others as well, that working in the mental health sphere was what is useful to me. And then so, there was a position that opened up at the company that

I work for currently, I applied for it, and I—and I got in. And so, I've been applying this clinically for um for about four years now.

Susi: You you gave a context of the kind of client who comes through. How are you integrating the body-based learning inside of that construct?

Austin: So, the body-based learning and the spiritual, mental, and emotional learning all derive from the same source.

Susi: Yeah.

Austin: And so, how I approach mind, body, spirit is the same regardless. And so, in the context of IOP, particularly in the neurodivergent communities, there's a lot of chronic pain. And so, I get to use a lot of these skills to help those individuals realize that your body can support you. And then when they realize that their body has not betrayed them, that they just need to listen to the signals a little bit differently, they need to use the body as a barometer, then that's when they find that their anxieties significantly diminish, their depression significantly diminishes, because they are working with the tools of the body. And so, for a lot of the neurodivergent community, there's a more body-based work um than with neurotypical communities that I work with. Um, one of the things that I have found to be absolutely fascinating uh with um trauma men cohorts, which I started doing this last week, is—and these are like like tough firefighters, these are people who have come out of military—I do something called the Dasha Chalana, which is a simple movement. Those of you who go through cert, you will see it, you will experience it. It is a yoga practice that developed from the Hatha Tattva Kaumudi in the Middle Ages, which is also a beautiful text, but that's a different conversation. [Laughter] And it's a simple, easy movement practice, and these big, strong, stereotypical men do this, and they're like, "I feel so much better." Mm. Just moving with ease, moving with stability. Like, "I understand what relaxation is like right now." One of the guys said this last week, for the first time in the last 15 years, their blood pressure medication was reduced because they showed up, and you know, again, like the test, like they were just able to regulate themselves in such a way, because of how they have moved through the body, and how they worked with the breath. And it sounds, for a lot of people, it sounds preposterous, but people who know yoga know that there is this potential here. And so, working with the body in this context is a gateway into working with the mind. And then there are some people whose minds are so strong that they've disassociated from the body. And so, they need to find a little bit of ease, a moment of stillness, a moment of stability in the mind, where they can then root into the system, into the physical being. And I've found that with those individuals, particularly eating disorders, right, where the hunger cues are completely ignored, and hunger isn't necessarily in the domain of yoga, but the awareness, that focus of the mind is, and so bringing the attention to the hunger cues becomes part of the process. And providing just that ease and that stability provides the nourishment to the mind that allows them to be able to feel into the context of the body, to then feel the hunger cues, to feel what the body is telling them about their safety, relatively.

Susi: Yeah, no, it's it's it's great, because it's something that, like, I've I've had the opportunity to work with a variety of different people who come through cert, um, who have who have who are humans. There's a there's a variety of people, because there's a they're they're human beings. And I've had the opportunity in my own life to work with a variety of people who have a variety of things. And what I love so much about the body is that I and and this started back when I was first doing my initial work, which is that no matter what someone is carrying—whether it's anxiety, trauma, chronic pain, or mental health challenges—the body is the tangible ground where everything meets. When you give people a way to inhabit their physical self with ease and stability, it creates a safe container to process everything else.

Austin, thank you so much for coming on today and sharing how you've taken these core principles and applied them to transform lives in mental health and intensive outpatient settings. It's inspiring to see how far these tools can go when they're rooted in true presence and honesty.

Austin: Thank you, Susi. It's been an absolute pleasure to share this work with you and your listeners.

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Susi: If you're interested in learning more about Austin's work or exploring the Yoga Therapy Certification program, check out the links in the show notes. Until next time, listen to your body when it whispers, so you don't have to hear it scream. Take care!