

My Turkey Neck and Thoracic Spine | #396



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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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Welcome, and welcome back. I am so glad that you're here because in this episode, I'm sharing a little experiment that I've been doing for about three weeks now with my thoracic spine and what my kids like to call my "turkey neck"—yes, my "turkey neck," the loose skin that's in front of my neck. I've been doing an experiment to really see what's the neuromuscular myofascial connections to that area of my body with other parts of my body.

I'll begin with what I've noticed about the skin in the front of my neck and what led me to explore my thoracic spine and rib cage's relationship, and then I'll share what changed along the way in my breathing, how I now stand on my feet, my weightlifting, my pelvic floor. And from there, I'll look at the anatomy connecting these areas and how those connections relate to what I've been feeling and noticing.

So let's get into it. So my kids have told me that I have a turkey neck, and yes, I can giggle about it because frankly, I don't really identify with it very much. I think it's curious. I've seen it happen over a period of time. I really don't think a whole lot about it, except lately what I've noticed is that there are times where there is more resiliency, and there's times when there's less resiliency, and that gets me really, really curious.

So I decided just for fun to see if I could shift up some of the patterns that are associated and or that I thought were associated to see if the resiliency lasted longer. Because what you hear a lot about with neck stuff when you're older is that it has to do with the skin itself. There's very little talk that I've seen—not that I've dug into it, but still it's not what comes through my feed, being that I'm over 50 and there's lots of stuff that comes through my feed—is I don't hear a whole lot about the relationships of your neck with other parts of your body.

So I got curious. I put on my detective hat, I put on my scientist hat and got into it. What I've noticed is the looseness in the front of my neck happens more so when I've been sitting for a while. It also shows up when there's more limitation with my breathing. So maybe there's a stress load, maybe there's... I'm thinking a lot, I'm sorting out a problem, or I'm learning a new skill, and in those scenarios, my breath tends to get a bit held. When I wake up in the morning, my skin is always more resilient. Yeah?

So this little experiment, I was specifically beginning to work with the ribcage, thoracic releases, and my breathing. And within four days, I noticed that the tissue in the front of my neck was more resilient longer during the day. The looseness wasn't coming back in the same way, even when I was sitting for a long period of time. I also noticed that my breath improved, and when I

saw my osteopath about a week into the experiment, both he and I noticed more suppleness in the tissues of my neck.

Now, I will say something here with my neck, is that I've not ever really had neck pain, but I do know that there's a tendency to compensate with my neck. So that may be, or may have been, part of what contributes to what goes on in my neck. I don't know. I can't say that with absolute certainty, but it's got me curious. What's also been interesting is in my weightlifting—bench press and deadlift—my personal bests have shown up.

Now, I'm not lifting one weight one time. I don't do one-rep maxes. I do three to four sets, anywhere between four, five to 10 repetitions, depending on the weight that I'm moving, and I was able to do the heaviest weight in both of those exercises several times—so six, seven times—and with way more ease.

And I started to incorporate a little exercise that helped kinda connect my rib cage, my breath, my pelvic floor, and sort of just let me settle. And I found when I did that, I was able to get more so into my legs during the deadlift and more so into my arms and serratus anterior and the rib cage in a way that wasn't bracing. Not that I was consciously bracing before, but my arms were working way more when I did that, and, curious, I was able to lift more.

As the weeks have progressed, I've also noticed more changes in how I experience my rib cage, my shoulders in relationship to my rib cage. My posture is more lifted. My breath is different—and I can't name it quite yet about what's different, but I can tell that it's different—and my pelvic floor has become more released. So it's been like a whole-body thing, which again, is not entirely surprising 'cause I see it a lot with clientele when we're working with rib cage and T-spine type stuff. They often notice things throughout their entire system. I think there's a lot of people who tend to hold tension in their rib cage and it's a common bracing pattern, so when that begins to shift and other parts of the body kick in, it's not surprising that they see changes throughout from head to toe.

Now, even saying all of that, though, you might have a question in your mind about why did I start with the ribcage? Why did I go to the thoracic spine? Why did I go there, say, rather than my neck itself or my head or my pelvis if I wanted to go further away? Well, there are three contributing factors to why I chose to play with my ribcage.

First is that I noticed that the skin of my neck got more turkey-ish when my head was a bit more of a head-forward position. And it didn't really begin in my head per se, but rather it came about from me being a little more slumped after sitting working at a computer. That's when I noticed the poke head forward the most.

I also noticed that when I put on a figure-eight strap around my shoulders, which is a common yoga strapping technique, that the appearance of my neck changed. So what the strap does is very gently—very, very gently—the shoulders sort of move back in relationship to the neck and the head and in relationship to the ribcage and pelvis.

Third was my breath. I noticed that the quality of my breath had something to do with the quality of the front of my neck. And as I mentioned a moment ago, I can't really name exactly what it is. I can't even name exactly the sensation. But there's something that's clearly linked between the two. One way that I think about it relating to the breath is that I like to say that before breath is breath, it's air sitting in front of my face. And then there's a pressure and a vacuum change, and in comes the air, turns into breath, does its respiratory thing, and then moves out. And the way my ribcage—anybody's ribcage—moves has an impact on how that air is drawn in and how that air goes out.

So with those observations and assumptions, that's why I went to my thoracic spine and ribcage. And frankly, when I started to play around with it, when I started to really get into some thoracic releases, I was really surprised at how much tension existed there—that existed not only between the ribs, but what felt like tissue that was around the ribs. I can't name specific muscles; I mean, I could probably map them, but it was more just like around the whole cage, or as Tom Myers likes to call it, the basket. It was like all the weaving of it and through it. It was quite limited.

And it was a bit shocking how that limitation impacted my ability to either extend my neck, rotate my neck, and side bend my neck. And when I didn't try to push through it, then something started to give. And I really wanna emphasize it because it felt kind of... I mean, if I could put some sort of imagery to it, it was like wearing a snug vest that didn't quite give. But it wasn't just external to it, it was kinda weaving through it.

But when I started to honor that and not push through it, and I came out of the exercise sequences that I was doing, the first thing I noticed was that I was standing differently, and I felt different on my feet. As I moved through my ribcage and my shoulders differently, the relationship between my head, my shoulders, and pelvis also shifted, and that led to me standing on my feet in a different way.

I also had—and this won't surprise you at all—a really deep, deep, deep sense of relaxation. As my ribcage started to feel more supple, my breath started to deepen, and I felt like I was sitting more in my pelvis—like I was just kind of sitting more comfortably and still. It's curious I'd even say that right now because when you look at the rough translation of the word asana, like yoga asana, that is sitting comfortably and still. So clearly things happening on a number of different levels here as I'm playing around with these connections.

What I found interesting about my breath, though, is that I would never have said that my breath was shallow, but yet as these changes were happening, somehow that breath was becoming fuller. Kind of think about it in this full-body breathing perspective, where the ribcage can move to the front and the sides and to the back, through the abdomen—front, sides, back—down to the pelvic floor, up through the shoulders. Like, I think about a baby when they're breathing; they really breathe with their whole body. There was more of that for myself, and this was just, like, a couple weeks into the experiment.

There was also a lightness to my breath, and with that lightness, there was also a lift in my posture. There are times where I can very... it's not a lot, like I wouldn't call myself a major slumper. I certainly was when I was younger, but I can move toward that, and now there's just... number one, there's less of it, and I can also catch it when it's starting to happen, and I'm now noticing what's contributing to it when it happens. And so whether it's that I need a rest, or that I need a walk, or I've been overthinking, or I need to get a glass of water, like all those things when I can kinda see... I'm starting to see what's needed in that moment that's related to that experience I'm having.

What's also interesting, and not entirely surprising, was that as I continued to explore my ribcage and thoracic spine, I felt more release in my pelvic floor. And I have had tendencies in the past towards a hypertonic pelvic floor, which I had learned about back in my late 20s when I had a pelvic floor assessment. And this was before I was considering getting pregnant, and I was really curious about the pelvic floor and the people I was learning from professionally. They got me curious enough to get a baseline before getting pregnant and having delivery and all those things.

So it was interesting that the pelvic health therapist told me back then that I had a tendency towards a hypertonic pelvic floor and gave me a number of exercises to do. So I did them quite effectively, and a lot of that hypertonicity settled away. Then, after I had my twins by scheduled C-section many years later—and the section was due to the position of the baby, so I didn't go through any labor beforehand, so there wasn't any labor, there wasn't any pushing, it was just like we went in there on a date at a time and had the abdominal surgery—when I was recovering from that surgery, it gave me an opportunity to look more closely at compensations that I already knew I had. And it was an opportunity to, like, all right, I have to reconnect with this deep, deep inner core, I have to reconnect with my pelvis and my ribcage, so now is the time to retrain these patterns.

And so with that, I was able to connect that much more to my pelvic floor. So overall, there was less tension in there already. But now here, during these past few weeks, and even this morning before I recorded this podcast episode, I was able to connect so much more to the pelvic floor. I can feel my pelvic floor moving with my inhale and exhale without consciously saying, "Okay, pelvic floor, move with inhale and exhale." I can feel the breath more full, more whole body than I remembered back in my 20s. It's pretty wild.

So with all of that as a result so far, let's look at some of the anatomical and biomechanical connections that may be associated. So if you're familiar with Tom Myers' work and the Anatomy Trains, you might know his model of the deep front line, and it maps a series of myofascial relationships from the feet and inner legs through the pelvis into the psoas and diaphragm and up into the neck. We could also take a look at that spiral line and its connection through the ribcage through to the pelvis.

Even just those two lines—we could go further afield with the other lines—but if we just stick with those two lines, they're a useful way to think about what I was interoceptively feeling. And it gives us a way to explore the relationships between my neck, ribcage, and pelvic floor. And we can also look at the specific structures.

And if I start centrally, there's the relationship between the diaphragm and the pelvic floor. And we know that there's been imaging studies that have shown coordinated movement between them during breathing when there is a healthy relationship there. And that gives me some context for the movement I was beginning to feel with my inhale and exhale.

And if we go upward towards the neck, we have the scalenes connecting the cervical spine and the upper ribs. And so these muscles can become involved when secondary breathing muscles are really, really required, like if the diaphragm's not moving that well. But also, if I'm integrated with whole-body breathing, they'll be involved as well. So there's really a direct relationship between the neck and the movement of breath.

And if we come back to the diaphragm again and its attachments to the lower ribs and lumbar spine, with its connective tissue passing over the psoas and quadratus lumborum, we're really looking now at connecting that ribcage and spine towards the pelvis. Now, none of this here tells me exactly why the appearance of my neck has changed or has changed for a longer period of time, 'cause it's not permanently changed, just that the length of time that I have more resiliency and elasticity has changed. But it does help explain why I was curious about exploring beyond my neck and why I kept paying attention when I began feeling changes elsewhere.

Now before I get into sort of some of the teaching takeaways that I wanna offer you, let's just take a moment and breathe. And notice what your breath is feeling like right now and where you feel your breath. And do your best to not try and change it—and I know when we start focusing on it, it tends to change—but just allow yourself to notice where your breath is and what it's doing. Maybe you feel it up in your chest or down in your belly. Maybe you feel it in your lower back, or your pelvic floor, or your upper back.

But take your hands now and place them below your collarbones, and just notice: does your rib cage move with your inhale and exhale?

And then take one hand down to your abdomen, the upper abdomen close to the bottom of your breastbone, and leave the other by your collarbones, and notice how the front of your body moves. And what's happening in your pelvic floor? Are you holding it? Or is it receiving the breath and moving with the inhale and exhale? It's not a bad thing if it's not; it just now becomes curious.

And then take both of your hands in behind your back in the lower part of your ribcage, and notice if there's any movement posteriorly toward your hands with your inhale. This can sometimes be a little more difficult to feel.

Okay, and now take your hands away from there and you're gonna raise the arms over your head and bring them behind your upper back. And can you feel air or breath in the upper part of your back?

And then move your hands, and now notice your breath, and notice how your rib cage moved or how it didn't.

So my experience has been there were areas like the upper part of my upper back that I didn't have much contact with in terms of feeling the inhale and exhale in the back upper part of my back. But over time, these past few weeks, I've gotten more and more connection back there. The same thing with my upper or lower back. And those two seem to be mostly connected to my pelvic floor feeling interoceptively, as well as the upper part of my head. And when I'm breathing better back there, my neck's not as turkey. Gobble, gobble.

So what can you take away from this for yourself or if you're a teacher working with clientele? I think the first thing is that we really have to notice what changes. And I'm into my 50s now, and I'm in that season where a lot of what I hear from people is, "Well, you know, you are in your 50s." I'm like, "And...?" Dot, dot, dot.

I'm also really fortunate that all of my career, right from the start, I've worked with people who are older than me, and I continue to do that. Still, more people that I work with are older than me. Now I'm getting to that age where there are people younger than me, but for the most part, 85% at least are still older than myself, so I've got great success with them. So I know fundamentally that things can change.

So in my case, the appearance of my neck varied with sitting position, how long I was sitting there, my breath, where I could feel my breath, what contributed to my breath getting held, and that gave me something to explore. That was curious and interesting. And as I explored and as I honored the movement that I had—when I felt the tension or the tightness around or through my ribcage and I didn't push through it, but rather I just paid attention to it and I moved within the limitation—I honored it, because you know what? If it's finding a home in my ribcage, it obviously has a good old reason why.

And as I honored it, something changed. And I noticed more than my neck. I noticed how I stood on my feet, how I breathed, what I felt in my pelvic floor, what was happening in my posture. And this is something you can bring into your own life and into your teaching. Your understanding of anatomy and biomechanics gives you ideas about where to look. So then watch how the person moves, listen to the story of what they're feeling, and use that information to guide you with what you do next.

The bottom line here is you can observe that something has changed without knowing exactly why. We can stay curious, keep exploring, and see whether those changes continue, because that's, I think, what's the most important thing here. If you are liking the changes that are happening, keep going. See what interest that sparks.

Now, if this has resonated with you, if you wanna carry along with me in my experiment and see how I'm doing this with clientele, following the principles that I'm teaching, this coming November, I am running Power of Pure Movement: An Intelligent Thoracic Spine and Rib Cage and Whole Body Integration, November 2nd and 3rd. Everyone who registers gets access to the recording. You've got forever access to it. I'd love for you to join me or to grab that recording. You can learn more over at functionalsynergy.com/thoracicspine. I'd love to see you there.

If you are a yoga teacher or a healthcare professional and you are really wanting to take this and up-level your skill in a whole new way, then you will love the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. And my next running of the intensive is April 2027. All the details are over on our website at functionalsynergy.com/intensive.