Getting Stronger Shoulders in Menopause: Listening to the Whispers | #398



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 Hately. 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 Hately.

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Welcome and welcome back. I'm really glad that you're here because today I'm continuing the conversation on menopause, shoulders, recovery, how to help yourself reduce and eliminate pain, and also to help your students who are in that menopausal transition or menopause itself—how to help them. Because really, for me, at the heart of this, it's really about coming into a place of strengthening and solidity. You know, really like really being solid and stable through your shoulder girdle and the rest of your body through this time of life, through this next era of life.

In the last episode, I talked about shoulders and perimenopause and menopause, and how there are changes happening through this time—that the hormonal environment is part of the picture, so is age, and so is our history. But also that context isn't the explanation. There's still the shoulder itself to look at, the mechanics to look at, and there's still movement to observe. And I shared how I like to work. I like to start small. I like to start with small foundational movements and get the shoulder joint working better, and then we add complexity to it. We learn how to load it, and we learn how to listen closely.

So that's what I wanna dig into today: the second part about really about listening to it and loading it. Because as we start to feel better and add more strength work, how do we carry the awareness from the first step with us? How do we notice the changes that enable us to add more weight, more repetitions, and more complexity? And that is where recovery comes in.

It all comes back to a key concept that I share in all of my trainings; it really is the foundation of so much of what I do. It's this notion of yellow lights and whispers. And to give you some context for utilizing yellow lights and whispers or even thinking about them, and while I've shared about them in lots of episodes through this whole podcast since the beginning of it, I wanna give you some context with a story of my persistency of pain that happened in my 20s.

I was a pretty good lightweight rower in my teenage years, having won some international competitions. And then as I moved through my teens towards my 20s, I started to get injured, and then I kept getting injured until in my mid-20s I found a fabulous physical therapist alongside finding yoga, and I found my way out of persistency of pain and into much better movement and just feeling better overall. And what changed was the way that I was focusing and the way my awareness was working. I was able to tune in and embody much more clearly, so the work the physical therapist was doing blended really well with what I was doing on my own.

And that was back in my 20s, and I really took on yoga after that period of time and sort of left the swimming and the running, all the other things that I was doing—I sort of left that to the side. And then early in my 30s, I decided I wanted to get back running again, especially to run a half marathon, which I had not yet done. And curiously, as I started my training program for this half marathon, a few months into it, I recognized some very interesting and familiar whispers—whispers that in my former life, we could say, I used to push through: the "Hmm, so that's what the early stages of IT band issues feel like."

And if I was back in my early teens, my late teens, my early 20s, I probably would've pushed through it all. But being in my 30s and having had a previous decade of awareness and understanding, I decided to shift what I was doing. I honored the whisper. I chose to adjust my yoga practice to enable better movement, to better manage the load of the running, and all in all, it enabled me to complete the half marathon without being in pain. I ran it strong, I ran it smooth, and it was great. It really opened my eyes to a very clear way of how powerful it is to listen to the whispers so you don't have to hear the body scream.

So how does this relate to the shoulder? When we begin to add strength work after doing all the foundational work, different tissues respond at different speeds. Muscles tend to respond fairly quickly. Tendons, ligaments, and joint capsule tend to adapt more slowly. Cartilage relies on movement: the loading and unloading of the joint is part of how it's nourished. And in the last episode, I talked about estrogen's relationship with collagen production and turnover. Tendons, ligaments, and joint capsules are all collagen-rich tissues, so it's reasonable to consider that at this time of life, those tissues might need a little more attention to recovery. Not because they can't change—they can—but the rest between the work is where a lot of that change can happen.

And here's the piece I find so important: you can feel stronger before the rest of the tissue is ready for more. Your muscles might be saying yes, your brain might be saying yes, your being might be saying yes, but the tendon or capsule might still be catching up.

So keeping all that in mind, let me share with you some of what I do when I'm at the gym, because I do like lifting heavy. It's really helpful for my riding, it's really helpful for my strength, obviously, and I really like doing it. So to bring some more context to this, let me share with you about how I work in the gym. So I've been going to the gym on and off for most of my life, and in the past number of years, it's been just a lot more consistent. And when I'm there, I'm keeping the attention that I bring to my yoga practice and to my small movement practice into my lifting practice.

To me, whether I'm doing small movement, whether I'm doing more fluid movement—like when I do my fluid or flow yoga practice—or whether I'm lifting heavy weights, it's all movement. I'm paying attention to the way the arm bone moves in my socket. I'm paying attention to where my ribcage is placed. I'm paying attention to whether I'm gripping or bracing. I notice other parts of my body, and if they're getting involved, like: are my toes starting to grip when I'm bench pressing, right? Am I clenching my eyes when I do something else when my eyes are not involved in the lift? I'm also perceiving the sensations in my tissue and muscle contraction

versus tissue strain. So I just, I'm noticing. I'm being aware. I'm not just going to a dumbbell and lifting it and going for it. I'm paying attention to the way my body responds to the dumbbell that it's holding.

So if I am doing a bench press and I have the weight on the bar, the first thing that I do when I'm on the bench is I just, I lie there and I breathe, and I sense where my body is in space. This is before I even lift the bar, and this takes, like, maybe two seconds, three seconds, and I just notice where I'm at. I notice where my head is at. I notice where my abdomen is at. I just notice where my body and my brain, my level of determination is at. If there's any emotional piece filtering in, if there's any fear, if there's clarity, I notice what's driving me to lift this weight.

And then I place my hands on the bar, and I notice as I lift the bar, the response to my body. Like, just in that early phase of lifting, I notice the response in my body, and I can feel if the load is the right amount, if the load is too heavy, if the load is too light. And then if it's too heavy, I bring it back down and I make a shift. That does not happen so much because I opt for less weight more than, more than more weight when I'm doing my first series of lifts.

And then I begin to move, and I'm paying attention as I move, as I bring the bar down and as I lift the bar up. I'm paying attention to the response in my body. I'm paying attention to the response in my mind. I'm allowing my witness self to pay attention to myself lifting so I can be in the sensation of the lift, and I can watch myself lifting, and then I go push it back up. And I usually do anywhere between four and 10 repetitions, depending on what my intent is for the lift. And then I'll do another one and do another one, and then I will put the weight back down, and I'll stop, and I'll breathe.

Sometimes I go to another exercise. Sometimes I just stay there and I sit and I breathe. It just depends on what my purpose is for that particular workout. But the same thing kind of plays in: is I'm noticing the response of the load to my body and my body to the load, and then I respond like that. I'm, I'm not committed to having to lift a certain number, and I'm not committed to going to absolute failure.

And the reason why I'm not committed to going to absolute failure is because if I go to absolute failure, I've probably already compensated or braced or gripped or held my jaw or, like, pushed my head into the bench way more than I need to. So usually I stop when I notice myself compensating. That way, in my mind, I can move through the range in as pure of a movement as possible with the load that my body, that my tissue can bear at that time.

And my lift might... like, each week I might add 0.75 pounds to each side, so 1.5 pounds to each side, whether it's a bench press, whether it's a shoulder press like with a, with a bar, or whether it's, um, a deadlift. I'll, I'll add just—I go incrementally up on the weight, 'cause if you think about it, if you add 1.5 pounds each week or even 0.75 pounds each week and you add that over multiple weeks, that's quite an increase over a number of months. So I can add really, really slowly so that my tissue responds to the adaptation and I can track the sensation of that adaptation, all the while easily breathing, compensating less, and moving more purely.

My aim is not to leave my workout exhausted. My aim is not to leave my workout, when it's a shoulder-based workout, to have my shoulders feeling exhausted. I'm a mom. I've got two kids. I've got things to lift. It's just not my desire. However, I do want to leave the workout feeling taller, grounded, lighter, freer, solid, stable, like I can take on the world. That is a great workout, because I am a mom with two kids and lots of things to do. So I want to have energy rebooted, tissue solid and responsive to take on life.

Now, for me, what I've noticed when I've worked this way and moved this way, I'm able to continue to add more weight each week to my lifts, and my body responds well. Now, there might be a question, because I don't think I specifically addressed this: is how do I know when to add more weight?

Two things. First, that I'm not compensating. That's number one: that the—I'm not bracing and I'm not gripping. And if I can push or pull whatever that weight is, whatever the exercise is, easily nine to 10 times, that's when I add more load. And the load that I add is generally a smaller amount to start, like I said, 0.75, 1.5, maybe 2.5, depending on how easy the original lift was. But I don't make the increments huge because my aim is to make this sustainably consistent week to week to week, and when you add 0.75 or 1.5 pounds each week and you multiply that by several weeks, put that out a number of weeks, that's adding quite a bit of weight easily, sustainably, predictably, and allowing for the space to allow tissue to change.

So let's now turn this to you and to your shoulder. When you're moving, whether you are lifting weights, whether you're in a yoga practice or a Pilates practice or any other practice, watch yourself moving. Like grab a—your c—your phone, your camera, look in a mirror, because oftentimes when we're compensating or when we're moving well, we can't actually tell.

So when you've got a camera or a mirror, take a look. When you're lifting, is your shoulder or are your shoulders creeping up towards your ear when you move? Are they rounding forward? Are you holding your breath or gripping? Is your neck starting to do more of the work? Is your lower back or QL starting to do more of the work? Is the effort different than it usually is for the same movement? Is there a pinch or a sensation that feels familiar from an old injury?

And then notice after the lift, after the exercise, now what do you notice? How does the shoulder feel? How does your, how does your whole body feel? And then later in the evening, how do things feel? And overnight, how did you sleep? And how did you feel the next morning?

When you start to play with some of those questions, you begin to understand how you are lifting, how you are moving, and how your body is responding. And if you're compensating quite a bit, that's the place that I like to begin. Because the beauty about body movement is that it doesn't lie. Either you're bracing or you're gripping or you're not, or your shoulders are lifting or, or you're not, or your ribs are moving or they're not. And by making the movement more pure, you're enabling the muscles that are meant to be driving that movement work better, and then the other tissue can work better as well.

And I have found that the recovery process when we move better is just so much more efficient because we're not borrowing from another place to try and make the area we're working with stronger. Because the reality is when we borrow from somewhere else, the whole system becomes weaker. We're asking another part of our body to do something that it's not designed to do.

So that's where these questions of drawing it back to you and to your body and to your shoulder really, really come in handy. That's the invitation. As you listen to the whispers, you'll actually be able to load more. You'll actually be able to do more. Sometimes people think when they hear me talk about going smaller and listening to the quieter signals that it's about doing less, but it's not. It's about doing exactly what's appropriate and then recovering well so you can keep building and your shoulder can get stronger and stronger, not only at this stage of life, but in the years to come.

This is the kind of thing we'll be talking about and digging more into with practical examples and movement sequences during Power of Pure Movement: Perimenopause and Menopausal Shoulder Love this November 23rd and 24th. We'll be getting into some of the research, anatomy, recovery, and mobilizing and strengthening your shoulders so you can do exactly what it is you wanna do. You can learn more and register over at **functionalsynergy.com/shoulderlove**.

So is this idea of moving better, moving more purely, getting out of pain, and really being someone who can help your clients—is that something that resonates with you? Well, if so, I'd love for you to join me over at the Therapeutic Yoga Intensive. And the next one, which is now open, is April 2027. You can learn more and register over at **functionalsynergy.com/intensive**.