

# REDUCING PHYSICAL TENSION

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## I. Introduction

- A. Is physical tension always bad? No.
- B. What is good physical tension?
  - 1. Lip tension (buzzing)
  - 2. Muscles to hold up instrument with good posture
  - 3. Balanced pucker/pressure
  - 4. Breath support
- C. What is bad physical tension?
  - 1. Raised shoulders
  - 2. Grunting sounds in throat
  - 3. Bad posture (result = tension/resistance while breathing)
  - 4. Unbalanced pucker/pressure
  - 5. Constricted airflow
  - 6. White knuckles; death grip
  - 7. Stress
- D. What are symptoms of bad physical tension?
  - 1. Poor/strained tone
  - 2. Inefficient playing
  - 3. Reduced endurance
  - 4. Dizziness
  - 5. Tender lips
  - 6. Poor accuracy
  - 7. Hernia
  - 8. Inaccurate playing
  - 9. Red face, bulging veins
  - 10. Stiff muscles
- E. Reducing tension will:
  - 1. Improve tone
  - 2. Encourage efficiency
  - 3. Improve endurance
  - 4. Enable accurate playing
  - 5. Be more comfortable

## II. Diagnosing Tension

- A. Watch yourself in the mirror, if you look uncomfortable then there is too much tension
- B. Record yourself playing in all registers and listen for a consistent, pleasant tone
- C. When you play, do you feel noticeably different than when you are talking? If so, there is too much tension.
- D. Feel your throat with your left hand during articulation and lip slurs to feel for guttural noises. When you articulate, slur, or release a note, do you grunt?

## III. Reducing Tension

- A. General
  - 1. Physical stretches, yoga, etc.
  - 2. Breathing Gym exercises (not just stretches, but all exercises)
  - 3. Daily physical exercise
  - 4. Get plenty of rest

## B. Specific to playing

1. Exercise #1 – straw method
  - a. Stand up
  - b. Place big straw between lips
  - c. Cover end with finger so no air escapes
  - d. Blow air and deliberately create tension all through body
  - e. Slowly release all tension while still blowing air
    - Keep shoulders down
    - Reduce neck to normal size
    - No blood rushing to head
    - Only tension you should feel is in lungs and gut
    - Notice difference between tension and backpressure
  - f. Release finger and let air flow naturally
  - g. This is the way we need to play all of the time
2. Exercise #2 – Pendulum inhale/exhale with large straw
  - a. Place straw between lips
  - b. Take a full breath (as if playing) and exhale through straw
  - c. Make sure there is no hesitation between inhale and exhale
  - d. After air is exhaled, inhale again (as if playing)
  - e. Exhale, repeat
  - f. Inhale/exhale should be one motion like a pendulum
3. Exercise #3 – tonguing (single or multiple) through small straw
  - Same as exercise #2, but with an articulation pattern on exhale
4. Exercise #4 – feel the tension (good and bad) while playing
  - a. Play a 2nd line G as relaxed as possible
    - Locate the tension in all parts of your body
    - Now eliminate tension in places where it is not needed (i.e. toes, legs, hands, chest, neck, eyebrows, etc.)
    - Feel how good and comfortable it is to play relaxed
  - b. Ditto, but then slur to 3rd space C and stay equally relaxed
  - c. Ditto, but then slur to 4th space E and stay equally relaxed
  - d. Etc.

\*Remember to feel air resistance instead of tension

## IV. Conclusion

- A. How often should these exercises be practiced?
  1. Whenever you notice any of the symptoms
  2. Daily, in different varieties and order
  3. While resting during practice
- B. Are these the only exercises to reduce tension?
  - No. Create your own!
- C. Reducing tension will increase endurance. But be aware that as endurance wanes, tension may creep in.