

RELAXATION, POSTURE AND ATTITUDE

RELAXATION

The shoulder, forearm, wrist and hand should be loose throughout. For maximum efficiency, use only as much muscular tension as is necessary for a technique. All the parts of your arms and hand that need not be involved in the performance of a technique should be relaxed and flexible, moving only sympathetically. Excess tension will decrease your speed and accuracy. Analyze your technique to make sure the habits you develop contribute to your control. Develop your personal technique as you discover the unique way your physiology works.

MESSAGE AND STRETCHING

Massage and stretching should be applied particularly to the fretting hand, since more dexterity is usually required in that hand.

- Allow both hands to dangle at your side. Shake them briskly to loosen up the hands and arms AND lubricate the joints.
- Relax the hand to be massaged. Stretch each adjacent pair of fingers apart to loosen the webbing between them.
- Sit down and lay your massaged hand palm-up on your thigh. Make a fist with your free hand and massage the palm with the knuckles of the free hand in circles about one inch in diameter. Using the thumb and fingers of your free hand, gently squeeze all the muscles and bones in the palm of the massaged hand to relieve tension.
- Wrap the thumb and fingers of the free hand around a finger of the massaged hand. Massage in a tubular fashion, squeezing the finger while moving up and down it and twisting around it. Include the thumb of the massaged hand.
- Bend the left arm at the elbow and touch the elbow to your ribs. Rotate the left hand clockwise and touch its knuckles to your left collarbone. Cover the back of your left hand with your right palm and use the right hand to gently turn the left hand even further clockwise. Use enough pressure to cause a slight discomfort in the left wrist. Repeat with the opposite arm. When done daily, this increases the flexibility of the fretting-hand wrist and greatly aids in quick chord changes and in changing from the “bending” position to the “classical” position. Descriptions of these two positions follow in the sections on fretting technique.

AVOID INJURY FROM REPETITIVE STRESS DISORDER

Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

The *carpel tunnel* is the area of your wrist beneath the muscles at the heel of your hand. It contains nerves and tendons which control the movement of your hand. Repetitive movements (such as playing guitar) can irritate the tendons and cause them to swell, which in turn irritates the nerves. Movements made with the wrist bent are particularly irritating and should be avoided. Like the strings on a marionette, the tendons manipulate the fingers. Once the tendons swell, they have a problem fitting through the carpal tunnel and are irritated even more, hence the term *carpal tunnel syndrome*.

Tendonitis is a general term referring to a chronic irritation of the tendons (another repetitive stress disorder). It is a symptom of carpal tunnel syndrome and of other irritations. When you experience any discomfort or pain in your hands during guitar practice use the following remedies:

- concentrate on relaxing any muscles that are not involved in the technique
- think about your posture (see below)
- take a short break to relax your mind and body
- massage and stretch the hands and arms
- breathe deeply throughout your practice: oxygen is great for the brain and body
- change to a different exercise

Some physicians might prescribe corticosteroid injection or surgery for repetitive stress disorders, but these treatments should only be used in extreme situations when all other alternatives have failed. Most problems can be solved with the checklist above. If they do not suffice, try professional massage, osteopathic treatment or take a Yoga or other stretching class.

Be aware of physical or mental fatigue. Mental fatigue can cause physical fatigue and vice-versa. Here is a fatigue checklist:

“I may be fatigued because”.....

- I'm not using good posture (see section below).
- I've been playing long enough for now and I need a break.
- I'm upset about something, and I need to do something first before practicing (sit and relax for a few minutes, take a walk, make a phone call, etc.).
- My body hurts and I need stretching, massage and a break.
- I'm holding my breath while I play, instead of breathing deeply.
- This exercise is irritating me and I need to do another one, play something fun for a few minutes, or take a break.

POSTURE AND HOLDING THE GUITAR

Always sit or stand with posture that provides free movement of your forearms, hands and fingers. Holding the head of the guitar above shoulder height allows the tendons in your fretting arm to loosen. Holding the head of the guitar too high can require too much bending in the picking wrist and tightens the tendons in the picking arm. Feel your body. Concentrate on relaxing the areas where you feel tension.

A Posture Checklist

- avoiding bending the wrists by keeping the head of the guitar away from the left shoulder.
- avoiding bending the wrists by keeping the head of the guitar elevated to about 45° from the floor.
- keep the elbow on the fretting hand arm near the side, except when fretting extremely wide spans or when barréing with the ring or little fingers .

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- when you sit and play guitar, it is preferable to use a chair height which allows the thigh on the fretting hand side to be parallel to the floor.
 - when you sit and play guitar, it is preferable to elevate the foot on the fretting hand side so that the knee is three to eight inches above the hip (more for a taller person) and place the guitar on the left thigh. If this causes discomfort in the lower back, avoid it (or do stretching for your lower back).
 - if you find yourself bending over while playing in a seated position (which may be because you have a long torso), try using a lower chair to position the leg on your fretting hand side so the knee is higher than the hip by an inch or two.
 - if you find it difficult to reach over the guitar with your fretting hand while playing in a seated position (which may be because you have a short torso), try using a higher chair to position the leg on your fretting hand side so the knee is lower than the hip by an inch or two.
 - keep the fretting hand positioned with the base of the little finger very close to or touching the bottom edge of the fretboard except when fretting extremely wide spans (especially those on the first string, lesser on the second string, etc.).

ATTITUDE

The fastest way to advance as a guitarist is to get into the habit of playing daily.

One of my students told me about this great idea he was taught by Howard Roberts (the jazz guitarist who was one of the founders of the Guitar Institute of Technology in L.A..

Howard said, “ get an egg timer and set it for five minutes the next time you practice. Then stop practicing.” Jeff said, “what??. I don't get it!” Howard continued, “then, if you feel you're up to it set it for six minutes the next day. Increase it by one minute every day, only if you feel you're psychologically up to it. You should be anxious to practice.” I thought this was a great idea.

Combine play and practice. You should practice a combination of fun stuff and hard work. If you don't enjoy it, you won't find it easy to do regularly. In the early months of your practicing, play something you know well for five or ten minutes, so you feel good about your playing. Then *focus* for two or three minutes and work up a sweat. Alternate back and forth. By *focus*, I mean complete attention to what you are studying: no distractions no indecision about whether you want to do this or not. You should choose the things you practice so they are applicable to what you want to play, so they are psychologically rewarding.

Develop your ability to focus for longer periods and more often during your play/practice sessions. After a few months you may be able to focus for ten or fifteen minutes at a time *and enjoy it*. A seasoned professional musician can play for a half hour to an hour at a time with complete concentration. It is incredible what you can accomplish in one hour with complete focus.