Minimizing Left Hand Tension: Immediate Concerns and Larger Concepts

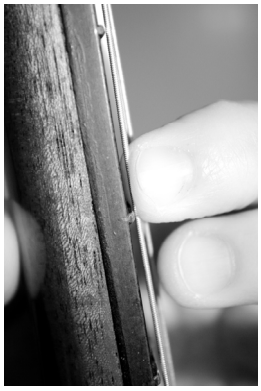
There are many physical barriers that can impede a student's physical progress on the guitar. One such barrier is guitar position; which is addressed in my article *Positioned for Success* (VMEA Notes, Winter edition, 2020, pp. 21 – 22). Another is the manner in which the student presses a string. This article will address immediate concerns and larger concepts related to minimizing left hand tension.

Pressing a String

It is important for students to understand just how little left-hand pressure is needed to sound a note on the guitar. To change the vibrating length of a string (pitch), the string need only be secured against a fret. Many students squeeze the string all the way to the fingerboard. This creates unnecessary tension in the left hand. The closer to the fret, the less pressure is needed to secure the string against the fret.

The hard surface that moves the string to the fret is the finger bone. If the student presses the string with the tip of the finger bone, it requires less energy than when the string is pressed with the flat surface of the finger.

Some students press with the flat surface of the finger because their fingernails prevent pressing on the tip of the finger. It is important to encourage students to keep their left-hand fingernails short. Other students press with the flat surface of the finger when their tip joints collapse. This is due to a lack of an arch in their hand position. (An arch is the strongest shape).



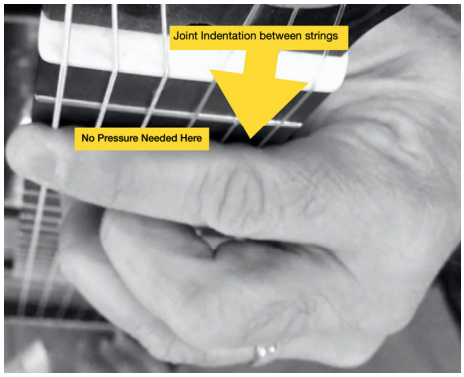
Bars

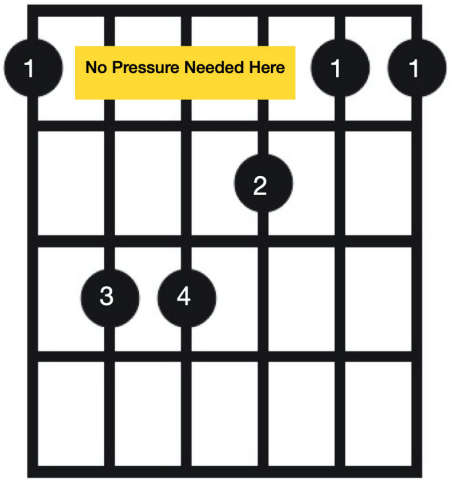
To execute a bar efficiently requires an understanding of the anatomy of the student's finger (usually the first finger). Fingers vary in length and what works for one student may not work for another. That being stated, the concepts offered here can be universally applied.

Side of the Finger: The fingers are naturally arranged radially. The radial nature of the first finger places the bony side of the finger across the strings. Many students place the bar with the fleshy surface of the finger to the strings and some even use the second finger to support the first. The fleshy part of the finger is a natural mute. By placing the finger on its bony side, the string is more immediately pressed and requires less pressure.

Joint Indentations: If a joint indentation is placed on a string, the note is often muted. Many try to solve this issue by applying more pressure (squeezing harder). The solution is to simply move the finger by either extension or retraction to avoid joint indentations.

Arched Bars: Most bar chords do not require pressure on all six strings. Consider a six-string movable major chord. No bar pressure is needed on strings 3, 4 or 5. The bar finger can then be arched to apply pressure only at the base and apex of the finger.





Two Exercises to Develop Awareness of Left-Hand Tension

Exercise No. 1: Have students play a chromatic scale buzzing every note with the left hand. Many students will find it difficult to avoid making a nice sound. Once they have mastered the ability to play with a buzzing sound, have them apply just enough pressure to make a clear sound.

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Exercise No. 2: Sustain is a stimulus. Once a note has been plucked, the left hand finger must maintain pressure for the string to continue its vibration. Many students increase this pressure during the sustaining period, thereby increasing left hand tension. An awareness of this will improve the student's ability to reduce tension.

Have students place a cloth (socks work well) under the strings by the bridge. This will mute the strings. Have them play their exercises or pieces with the mute. Directly after playing, have them take the mutes off and play again. Ask them if they feel a difference.

Larger Concepts

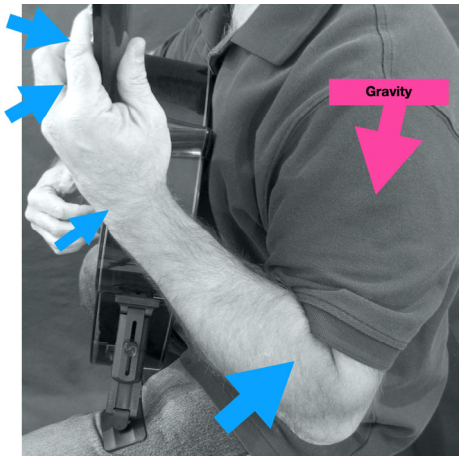
Many students only think about pressing a string with their fingers. That fact is, pressing a string can be done with the entire upper body. Using larger concepts can reduce tension significantly.

Larger Concept 1: Leverage

When pressing a string, all that has to take place is that the finger move toward the fingerboard. This can be done by moving from the shoulder, elbow, wrist, knuckle or middle joints. Using larger joints to press the string can even eliminate the counter pressure of the opposing thumb. This approach is only possible due to the right arm resting on the lower bout of the guitar. The right arm provides the counterweight needed for leverage. The student's body then becomes the fulcrum or pivot point in this leverage system.

Larger Concept 2: Gravity

A string can be pressed by simply allowing weight from the arm to fall. This is not the complete relaxation of the arm, but simply releasing some of the arm's weight to supply energy.



Conclusion

It should not hurt to play the guitar. If it does, many factors may be involved which include the size and/or shape of the instrument, position, action, neck relief, string tension and more. An instrument (and strings) can be replaced and specifically chosen for their playability. Efficient technique, on the other hand, requires an informed decision. By understanding the concepts presented here, I hope that you and your students will minimize tension, avoid pain and have a lifetime of happy music making.