

Interpreting Body Signals

Our body's tactile sensory system actively monitors everything we do physically. It receives and transmits signals that guide us throughout the day, and even at night while we sleep.

Although novice musicians may not have a private teacher to guide them, everyone, in my view has *inner teachers*, and without our "inner teachers" we couldn't learn to play a musical instrument. Our sense of hearing and our bodily tactile sense are the main sensory channels we use for playing music.

When we first begin playing guitar we are virtually flooded with physical sensations. Becoming adept at interpreting the signals our body sends us is an often overlooked tool. Professional musicians, without exception, have a vast inner sense of what the body signals mean and how to utilize them in the service of their playing.

Fortunately, there is a wonderful correlation between beautifully produced sounds and the physical actions that make them. In short, it feels good to play well. And, if you are fortunate, it feels great to play great!

Listening to Your Body's Signals

Learn to monitor and correctly interpret your body's signals. Allow your body to help guide you to mastery of the guitar. The build-up of tension, soreness, or aches of various kinds does not mean that you should "try harder." Once you have received the body's signal of discomfort, it means to rest for a moment, relax, and begin to look into the causes of the tension. Relaxation before repetition is better than constant repetition.

Backache

If you develop a backache, check the following:

1. Height of the foot stool. Try adjusting the height and seek a level which is more comfortable.
2. Keep your lower back straight. Slumping and bad posture increase lower back stress substantially.
3. Sit nearer the edge of the chair and lean slightly forward, with your feet positioned so that you feel well grounded as you begin to play.
4. Breathe fully, rather than shallowly. When you do not inhale fully your back muscles cannot relax as much as they need to. Over time the muscles will tire and begin to get sore.

Shoulder Ache

1. This is usually the result of sitting awkwardly, so review the steps for sitting position, and see if that helps.
2. If your shoulders are hunched when you play, let them return to their natural orientation.

Left or Right Forearm Tension

1. This results from inefficient leverage and too much muscular effort, in both left and right arm actions. Review arm and hand positions in order to create better leverage as you play.
2. Try a passage that you associate with an increasing level of tension, but reduce the pressure you are using to press the strings down. Ultimately, using the least amount of pressure and minimal muscular tension will help you increase the control of your playing. That in itself will reduce forearm tension.

Left Wrist Tension

1. Check the wrist and, if it is excessively bent, straighten it slightly.
2. Check the position of the thumb. It should be perpendicular to the neck of the guitar and be placed behind the first and second fingers. Study the section on left hand position and its accompanying photos.

Right Wrist Tension

1. If your wrist is straight when you play tension will tend to increase over time. It should be moderately bent as you play.
2. Make certain that your forearm rests gently on the shoulder of the guitar. If you press down too much on the guitar all the muscles will eventually tighten as a result.

Sore Fingertips

Sore fingertips are a very common occurrence for novices. Usually all soreness will disappear after a few weeks of moderate practice.

If soreness persists:

1. Your guitar may be at fault. The string action may be too high, or the frets may need adjustment. Have someone who is qualified look at your guitar to make sure it is not in need of repair or adjustment.
2. Novices almost always press too hard at first. Lighten your touch and practice using minimal left hand pressure. If you watch experienced guitarists play it seems as if they are barely pressing the strings down. That is an accurate observation. So experiment until you find just the necessary but sufficient amount of force to use for pressing the notes down.
3. For a while practice for shorter time periods and increase the resting time between sessions.

Your body's signals, once you learn to interpret them, provide you with an infallible potential pathway for developing your mastery of the guitar. They are always true reflections of what you are doing, and there is almost nothing more fulfilling than resolving an ache, tension or pain into a cohesive set of actions that in turn produce beautiful musical sounds.