

Tension: A Singer's Nemesis

The number one way to improve your voice, to extend your range and create the voice of your dreams is to recognise and release unnecessary tension in your body and the muscles that control your voice. If you are struggling with singing high notes, or running out of breath quickly it is most likely a singing tension related problem. We hold tension in many areas of the body and in this article I am going to show you how to recognise it and release it with effective (and sometimes crazy) exercises.

Why is tension a bad thing?

To sing naturally and with freedom is easier than you think. Most singers use far too many muscles to sing a note, whether it is high or low. Have you ever witnessed someone trying to sing a very high note? You will notice muscles in the neck, face, abdomen and torso tense up as they try and belt that high note. All of that singing tension is not helping the situation, it's actually **preventing the singer from performing at their best**. Singing with tension can have a number of negative effects:

- Prevents a singer from reaching true potential.
- It's a "High Note Killer".
- It will affect your breathing.
- Your Tone will suffer.
- It can lead to vocal disorders.

I am going to show you how to avoid these problems. Before I tell you how to release tension you need to discover where you are holding it.

Where do you hold tension?

The most important areas of your body to check for tension include:

- Neck
- Throat
- Jaw
- Tongue
- Lips
- Shoulders
- Abdomen

All of these areas of your body can have a **dramatic impact** on how you sound and the amount of effort it takes for you to sing. **For each of the areas we will be checking I want you to sing a phrase of a song.**

To check for tension in your **neck** you will need to use a mirror. Sing your phrase and watch in the mirror for any visible tension in the front of your neck. Are your tendons sticking out as you sing? Does your neck become red? These are signs that you have tension.

To check for tension in your **throat** you will again need to use a mirror. Sing your phrase and notice if the bump in your throat (called the larynx or "adam's apple") starts to rise when you sing. This is a sign that the muscles which control your voice are not coordinating the right way and will certainly lead to **vocal tension and fatigue**.

Your **jaw** is another common area for tension. I want you to sing your phrase but this time chew at the same time! I know it sounds crazy but trust me on this one. If you find it difficult to chew and sing at the

same time you may be holding some tension there. **Tension in your jaw will affect the tone of your voice.** Your jaw is one of 3 articulators which determine your tone.

The second articulator and prime suspect when it comes to unwanted tension is your **tongue**. I want you to sing your phrase with your mouth slightly open, just enough so that you can see your tongue. See if you can keep your tongue relaxed at the front of your mouth, sitting on your bottom teeth as you sing. **If you find that your tongue wants to retreat back into your throat as you sing it's a sign of tongue tension.** This will affect your tone.

The third articulator is your **lips**. Singers often over stretch their lips when they sing. Try it. Notice what it feels like to sing with tense lips. Now relax and sing without the tension. This technique of experiencing the tension, then experiencing the relaxation is a great way to program your brain to recognise the difference. I encourage you to try this with all of the possible tension areas.

Next we have the **shoulders**. This was a major tension area for me as a student. To check for tension you will need your mirror. Stand in a natural position. See if you can drop your shoulders from this position. Don't force them down, just see what happens if you relax them. Do they drop further? If so, like me, you are holding some tension there.

Finally let's check your **abs**. They need to be relaxed and tension free to allow for **optimal low breathing**. Sing your phrase and check to see whether you are tensing your abdomen as you sing. If so then you will need to work on relaxing those muscles.

Remember, it's a great idea to experience what it is like to sing with tension in these areas of your body, then sing without the tension to re-program your brain to recognise the difference.

How To Release Tension

Okay so now you have a good idea about where you can/are holding tension. Let's discuss some ways to release it.

Let's start with your **neck**. Gently move your head from side to side and back and forth. Get used to the feeling of relaxation. Now, sing your phrase while doing the head movements. **Doing this will prevent the muscles in your neck tensing in one position.** Another great exercise to release neck tension is bending over to let your head drop and sway. This is very effective for relieving tension in the back of your neck.

Some great exercises to release tension in your **throat** include:

- **Humming**
- **Lip rolls**
- **Vocal Sighs**

These exercises are excellent ways to keep your throat relaxed and your larynx low. They allow the muscles that control your vocal cords to coordinate in the right and most efficient way.

The best exercise to release **jaw** tension is actually the same one used to discover it! **Chewing**. This will stretch the muscles that control your jaw, allowing for more flexibility.

To eliminate **tongue** tension you can do 2 things:

1. Stick out your tongue as far as you can and hold it for 5 seconds. Repeat 3 times. This will stretch the root of your tongue which is responsible for most tongue tension.
2. Hold the tip of your tongue with your fingers (gross I know!) and attempt to sing your phrase with as much clarity as possible. This will stop your tongue from pulling back into your throat. It will also add clarity to your tone.

To release **lip tension** I suggest a lip roll. What is a lip roll? Think of the sound “brrrr” a person makes when they are cold. You need to make your lips vibrate together. It is impossible to do this with tense lips so it’s a good indicator that you have released the tension.

Rolling your shoulders is the best way to relieve **shoulder tension**. Sing your phrase while doing this.

Finally, to release tension in your **abdomen**, lie down and place an object on your stomach. Your goal is to make the object move up and down as you breathe in and out. If you can achieve this it means your diaphragm is descending. This is very important for breathing and is impossible if you are tensing your abs. Something else you can try is panting, yes just like a dog! Try and make your stomach move in and out as you pant.

Well that’s it for this article. I hope you learned something valuable about your voice. I recommend incorporating these exercises into your daily vocal routine to get the most out of your voice.

Ian Castle

To view video demonstrations of the exercises discussed in this article enroll into my [Free 8 Week course](#).