

Strength Hacking Course Day 3: Tension & Relaxation

“Tension = force. The tenser your muscles are, the more strength you will display and build.”

- Pavel Tsatsouline in *The Naked Warrior*

There's no doubt about it. If high-level strength is what you're after, mastering muscular tension is absolutely essential. Even if you have no aspirations of hoisting preposterous poundages to the absolute limit of your abilities in the various barbell and kettlebell lifts (such as the deadlift, squat, bench press, military press, and what have you), the ability to generate tension is essential for your constant forward progress.

The reason why is simple: the harder you can contract a muscle, the more resistance you can handle – be it with a kettlebell, barbell, or your own fair flesh.

What's more, tension translates to control – namely of your nervous system, which determines how hard to tense a muscle, and thus how strong to let you become.

And if you're leaving deliberate, focused tension practice out of your training, you're probably leaving loads of steady gains behind as well.

This one simple tip (i.e. practicing tension) has long been known to improve performance in a variety of endeavors. Martial artists use it to strike harder. Powerlifters use it to lift bigger. In fact, Ernie Frantz, one of the godfathers of powerlifting, used to practicing tensing his body as much as possible throughout the day every day to keep his skills sharp. It's a powerful (and effective) way of easily ratcheting up your skill at literally any grinding lift, and even has strong applications in ballistic lifts like kettlebell swings.

So, how exactly do you do it?

By learning how to generate tension from nothing – particularly in the largest “nerve force generators” in your body. These simple techniques will show you how to get started connecting the disparate parts of your body into one solid unit.

- 1) **Squeeze your fists as hard as you can.** Your hands are host to the largest concentration of nerve endings in your body, and the strength of your grip is a major indicator of not only how much strength you're capable of expressing, but also your health and longevity.

If at all possible, try to practice this and the next few drills with a partner. Squeeze your partner's hand as hard as you can (point your index finger so as not to damage their hand as your strength levels begin to increase). Compare and contrast your grip strength periodically with your partner between the following drills. If you do it right, it should noticeably increase.

- 2) **Back pressure crunch.** Place a towel on the ground underneath your low back and lay down. Using your abs, try to crush the towel. This short, tight feeling is what a real abdominal

contraction should feel like, and should be applied to all of your lifts.

If you have a rubber band and want to try a more advanced variation, you can give this one a try: <https://youtu.be/1bhE8WzKck0>

- 3) **Glute bridge.** While still on your back, bend your knees until your feet are flat on the floor. Once you've done this, press your hips up into the air until you feel your butt muscles begin to contract.

Don't let your feet get too close to your butt or you'll likely feel the majority of the tension in your low back. Likewise, don't let them be too far out or you'll feel it primarily in your hamstrings. Play with the positioning a little bit until you find the "sweet spot"

- 4) **"The Corkscrew"**. The corkscrew technique describes the sensation of your arms rotating outward at the shoulder, thus creating torque at the shoulder joint and recruiting loads of muscle in the upper body that will help support progressively more difficult strength efforts.

There are two ways you can do this: 1) get a broom handle, hold it out in front of you at chest level with straight arms (i.e. locked elbows), and attempt to "break" it by twisting your hands outward in opposite directions. 2) Get down in the pushup position plank (i.e. the top of the pushup position) grip the ground tightly with your hands until your fingertips turn white, and then "turn" your hands outward. Your hands will stay in place; this is more of an intention than anything. Nevertheless, you will notice a great amount of muscle recruitment in doing this.

- 5) **The Hiss of Death.** Your breathing has the ability to tense your body or relax it. To maximize the tension in your body, add in hissing breathing – similar to what you hear martial artists and boxers do when they're punching. This hissing is not just for sound effects; it helps ratchet up your abdominal pressure and thus the tension you are generating throughout your body.

While strength requires tension, many other equally useful and beneficial physical qualities require relaxation – namely flexibility, speed, mobility, etc.

We live in a world that is stressed to the gills more often than not, and tension often comes to us naturally – at least in places like our neck, shoulders, back, etc. With that in mind, it's crucial to learn how to relax as well, and in my mind, no tension practice should be without relaxation practice immediately following it.

Here are a few of the best top-notch tips for relaxing in a hurry

- 1) **Deep, diaphragmatic breathing.** Frankly, this by itself should be enough, but there are tweaks you can add on to really pile on the relaxation. My personal favorite is a 1:2 inhale/exhale ratio. For example, if your inhale takes 3 seconds, you will take 6 seconds to breathe out.

- 2) **Close your eyes and visualize your body relaxing.** Visualizations are powerful and (in my correct opinion) the single most UNDERUSED weapon in your strength training arsenal – so much so I wanted to include a chapter on how to visualize properly to improve your strength (But alas, I have not yet found a way to succinctly systematize it, so perhaps in a future course). For example, in *The Naked Warrior*, author Pavel Tsatsouline cites a study in which participants increased their bicep strength by 13% over the course of 6 weeks simply by visualizing their biceps tensing – without doing any actual work! You can use the same mental power for your relaxation, focusing particularly on muscles that tend to be problematic, such as the traps and neck.
- 3) **Fast and loose.** Fast and loose drills are as simple as they come, but very effective. You simply shake your limbs to encourage the muscles to relax.

A good way to get the proper effect is to shake your arms and legs as if you're trying to shake water off of them. Combine this with the deep breathing and closing your eyes and you'll be far more relaxed in no time.

These relaxation drills are no joke. Tension may equal strength, but it also equals fatigue. Relaxation equals endurance, and it also equals recovery – particularly between sets of strength exercises. To get the most out of your workouts, you should always be practicing something – be it the movements you're training, or your ability to recover between sets. With that in mind, recovery drills such as relaxed breathing and fast and loose should always be a part of your repertoire.

Once you've digested all this information, go check out the map for Day 3 and begin your next mission.