

# Top 10 Practicing Hacks



Learn faster & practice smarter  
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## State management

State management is one of the most important things to pay attention to, if you want to get the most out of your practicing time.

If practicing feels like a chore and you'd much rather do something else, you might as well not practice. Because, this is the perfect setup to go into a downward spiral. You start by telling yourself how hard it is, and before you know it your brain will look for proof. "See, you made that mistake, because you don't have what it takes. You are never going to be as good as XYZ. You should just give up and leave it to someone who is more talented." From there on your playing will get worse and worse, which will reaffirm your self-judgement and so on.

Now, in a situation like that we could take the easy route and just skip the practice session. Which in some cases is the best option. In most cases though, there is a lot you can do to turn that spiral around. Some of it has to do with focusing on the right thing. Some of it has to do with setting the right goal and breaking the process into manageable chunks. But even if all of that is in place, there are days where you just don't feel it. Maybe you just got bad news or had a fight with someone close to you. In these situations it is super hard to concentrate and avoid putting yourself down for every tiny mistake you make.

**"The difference between a master and his student is that the student despairs of mistakes that the master made a 1000 times."**

Unfortunately, I don't remember where I read this. But it became my mantra when it comes to making mistakes. You can't become a master, if you don't make mistakes. We all learn from our mistakes. It's the old saying that every mistake can be seen as an opportunity. An opportunity to learn. Don't get me wrong. Just making mistakes won't get you anywhere. You will have to analyze what goes wrong and how you can fix it. That's when you learn from your mistakes.

Most of us tend to put ourselves down, when we make a mistake by accident. But by doing so we miss the opportunity to learn from it. And consequently we will do the same mistake over and over. So don't judge yourself when you make a mistake, but also don't just ignore them in order to feel better about yourself. Be honest with yourself. Because, if you truly know at what point of mastery you are you can approach the next level and actually reach it. If you are dishonest with yourself, you either run danger of making you feel bad about yourself or you set goals that are completely out of reach and frustration sinks in when you realize you are not as good as you thought you were.

While this might help during a practicing session, this information alone won't be enough to change your mood before you even start. Thanks to neuroscience we now know a lot more about how our brains work and can use this knowledge to put our brains into the perfect state for learning.

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So here are a few techniques to do exactly that:

## 1. Smile for a minute

This might sound ridiculous, but it actually works. Because, what we tell ourselves becomes our inner truth. So if we tell ourselves that we are stressed, our body will act accordingly. It will release the stress hormone cortisol, which can impair your ability to learn and memorize. If the stress level is high enough, it causes us to go into fight and flight mode. This state switches off most thinking processes and will instead make us intuitively react to what's happening around us. Which is not very helpful when wanting to learn from our mistakes. Thankfully, laughing or smiling for 60 seconds will do the trick and help us exit this state (but it has to be without interruption). When we laugh or smile our face muscles push a nerve that sends a message to our brain. "Be happy!" As a reaction our brain will release happy hormones (endorphins). This will reduce the stress level and put our brain back into thinking mode.

**Tip:** If you manage to laugh naturally, 10 seconds will do the trick!

## 2. Practicing mantras

Remember, whatever we tell ourselves is what our brain believes to be true. And it will automatically search for evidence. So if we tell ourselves something along the lines of "I can do this! I'm a great learner! Mistakes are the way to mastery!" Our brain will look for evidence to prove it. All of a sudden our focus shifts from all the things that don't work yet to all the things where we made progress over the last sessions. Obviously, you have to come up with a mantra that suits you. Use your own wording and say it to yourself a couple of times before you start to practice.

## 3. Little wins

Another thing I like to do is starting with an exercise that guarantees a little win. Just reach for the lowest hanging fruit. One way of doing so is repeating what you did in the last session 20% slower. Starting with a win will flood your brain with dopamine and motivate you to win more. It creates great momentum from the get go. And even if the next exercise is not an easy win, the dopamine will help you to push through the struggle to get to that next win.

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## Practice space set up

Another really important factor is the your practicing space.

### **1. Don't mess around**

If your practicing space is messy and full of distractions, it becomes really hard to focus and to get into the flow. So make sure your practice area is tidy before you get to work. For extra encouragement you might even print out your practice mantras and hang them up, so they will be right in front of your face during the whole practicing session. This permanent reminder can have a huge effect on our keeping us in the right state of mind.

### **2. Air and water**

If you can, air your practicing space before you start. A lack of oxygen can quickly slow down your brain. Same applies when you don't drink enough. So especially when you're in for a long one, make sure to air and have plenty of water ready. Not just in the fridge. Always have a full glass of water in front of you. Once you get into the flow, you won't remember to stop to get a drink. So make it easy for yourself and have it all ready before you start.

### **3. Lighting**

If you have the chance to get sunlight into your practice space, take full advantage. Sunlight will make your brain release serotonin. This hormone will put you in a better mood, help you relax and have a better focus. Avoid dim lights and lights with too much red. This can trigger the release of melatonin. A hormone that tells your brain it's time to go to sleep. Not a great help when you want to focus.

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## Focus on one skill at a time

If you want to progress quickly, it is advisable to focus on one skill at a time. Science says that it takes us an average of 25 minutes to get into the flow of a process, once interrupted (depending on the duration of your session this might be quite a bit of time your losing). Which doesn't mean you can only practice one technique or method per session. But you should make sure that you do so sequentially instead of switching back and forth between slapping, scales and improvisation.

**Tip:** If you want to instal a new skill from scratch and do so in the most effective way possible, it is worth it to drop everything else for a while and only focus on this one task for 2 - 4 weeks. You won't believe the amount of progress that is possible, if you narrow your focus like that.

## Set an achievable goal

Setting goals is generally a good idea. Even if it is some out of reach dream goal. Because goals don't necessarily exist to be reached. Their main purpose is giving us direction. Once we have direction we can measure our progress and figure out the next steps.

It's a little bit different when we are talking about a single session. Here it makes a lot of sense to set goals that you can reach. Because every goal that you reach will trigger your brain to release dopamine and this will motivate you to master the next challenge.

**Check out my "FLOW HACKING" tutorial #2. Here I go a little bit more in depth about how to set S.M.A.R.T. goals.**

[FLOW HACK #2](#)

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## Break it down into little manageable chunks

This hack is directly tied to setting achievable goals. In order to set achievable goals we have to break down the tasks we are facing into little pieces. There is no use of proclaiming “I want to be able to slap by the end of the month!” The problem is, it’s not specific at all. When you set goals, they have to be as specific as possible. Only then can you measure your results. Let’s say you want to learn how to slap. Breaking this goal down means first thinking about what style of slapping (Marcus Miller, Mark King, Les Claypool, Fieldy?). Once you have an answer to that, you should pick a specific song. Then you break down the song into sections and put them in an order from easy to hard. Then you take the easiest part and break that down even further (one bar at a time or count at a time). Now you have a chance to really narrow down on the fine motor skills that you need to practice and automate. What does the thumb do? What are the other fingers doing? Is this technique working with the strap length I use? And so on. Start with the lowest hanging fruit. Break it down until you can already do the first piece. That’s when you know you have broken down the task into small enough bits to get ahead as fast as you possibly can.

## Do it slow

Once you have set your goals and broken down the task at hand you should go into the slo-mo mode. Slow down the movement until you are conscious of every little element of it. You really want to make sure that you play every note perfectly and your finger movements are dialed back to an absolute minimum before you start speeding up. Some people say you should always practice with a metronome. Well, you shouldn’t before you haven’t mastered the micro movements. Otherwise you will install bad habits that will be a major pain to get rid of once you automated them. Do it right from the beginning. The only way to do so is to start slow!

**“The difference between a student and a master is that the student will practice until he gets it right. The master on the other hand will practice until he never gets it wrong.”**

This little saying puts the importance of ultra slow practice into perspective. I admit, it takes a lot of patience to get the movements to the most economic level without checking if you can play it at the ultimate tempo. But you will get there quicker, if you take the time in the beginning. Do it right until you can do it perfectly at least 10 times in a row.

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## Challenge yourself

Having perfected your micro movements, it's time to raise the bar. Continuously. What you don't want to do is practicing the same riff at the same speed for days and days. You already automated the movements. Playing them over and over without raising the edge, will keep you in your comfort zone and therefore no progress will happen. Let's be honest. How could it, if you are repeating what you already can do perfectly.

The moment you can play whatever you're practicing 5 times in a row without a mistake you should increase the challenge. This can happen in a few different ways. The easiest way being increasing the tempo. As you learnt in Practice Hack 4 you should do so in manageable chunks. In most cases that means 1 - 5 bpm increments. There are no hard rules for this, but it's always easier to go in tiny steps but constantly increase the tempo than jumping ahead to far and having to reduce the tempo again.

Challenging yourself will cause the good kind of stress. It will put you into hyper focus mode and helps you to get into the flow. Which on it's own can more than double your learning speed.

TIP: You can read more about "Deep Practice" as Daniel Coyle calls it, in his book "The Talent Code".





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## Routine / Tiny habits

No practice will get you far without routine. Frequency is absolute key to installing skills at an accelerated tempo. My students are probably among the most creative ones to come up with excuses why they couldn't practice. But I don't let any of that count. The fact is, if you don't take the time to practice, it just means it's not important enough to you. Which is totally ok. Some people want to play music to relax and release stress. So squeezing the most out of each practice session seems ludicrous to them. I have no problem with that. It just means you will progress way slower than you could. As long as you're enjoying playing bass anyway, who am I to tell you to practice more?

I'm pretty sure you don't fall into this category. Because otherwise, why would you have downloaded this e-book.

So let's talk about tiny habits. Tiny habits is a fool proof approach to creating routine in your practicing. It all starts by committing to practice every day. While most of us might not have the luxury to practice 1 - 2 hours a day (which is what I recommend for the best results), we all can manage to start with the lowest hanging fruit (here we go again) and play just one note a day. As you can see, these practicing hacks feed into each other. If you pick a goal that is achievable no matter what, it will create momentum. You can always decide to pick up the bass and play for 10 minutes if you feel like it. If you don't, it's fine too. Because, you only committed to playing one note a day. One condition is that you have your practice space set up properly and your instrument is ready to go. If you first have to take your bass out of the gig bag, find a cable that works and get the sheet music you're currently working on... you've already wasted precious minutes of your practicing time and lost all the momentum. On some rare occasions you might get into the mood by setting everything up to go. But I wouldn't count on that. Just remove as much friction as you can, so you don't come up with excuses like "I can't find my cable."

Once you've done the one note a day for a week you can use Practice Hack 6 to slowly increase your practicing time. Don't be too hard on yourself. It is said that creating a habit takes somewhere between 30 and 90 days. So give yourself some time and approach it with a longterm goal in sight rather than trying to do it all in one week.

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## Healthy sleep

When we sleep our brain categorizes all the information we took in during the day and decides which is important and prioritized. Which means that not getting enough or healthy sleep is a sure way to slowing down the learning process. Unfortunately, healthy sleep is often hard to guarantee. If you have kids or pets that don't let you sleep at night and wake you up early in the morning, getting enough sleep can be quite a task to manage.

Don't despair, there are a lot of things you can do to improve the quality of your sleep. There are the standard tips of not eating during the last 3 hours that you're awake. And stop using digital devices 1 hour before going to sleep. One thing that worked amazingly well for me is getting up at the same time every day, be it week end or holidays. Because of electric light and our little tiny screen friends most of us have a pretty messed up circadian rhythm. I used to stay up every night until late hours. My body just couldn't calm down until I eventually "dropped dead" by exhaustion. You can imagine that the sleep I got wasn't very healthy. My body was so busy with filling up the energy reserves, that the cognitive processing that should happen in the REM phase of ur sleep was not what it could have been. Some other things that improve sleep quality are cold showers, pitch black sleeping area and exercising in the morning.

## Exercise

I already showed you that exercising can help improve your sleep quality. There are a few other positive effects that regular exercise has on your practicing. Firstly, it will trigger your brain to release endorphins. And you already learnt that this will raise your mood and set you up for a kick ass practice session. Jim Kwik has this saying

**"When you body moves, your brain grooves."**

And as bassists we want our brain to groove, right? Movement is the easiest way to wake up your brain. Even if it's just 4 minutes of push ups, jumping jacks and the other usual suspects, it will dramatically improve your concentration and ability to take in and process more information.

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## Welcome to the M.M.Education Community!

**My name is Mischa Marcks and I'm the guy who thinks that natural talent is a myth and the 10,000 hour rule is neither a guarantee nor necessity to becoming a master on the bass. Since 2008, I'm helping bass players around the world to becoming the bass player they want to be.**

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