

Bowenwork

Bodywork Without the Work

BY SANDRA GUSTAFSON

Author Sandra Gustafson performs the upper back procedure to address upper body tension and postural alignment.

Photos courtesy Andrew Hathaway Photography.



“You can work on more than one person at a time?”
“Don’t you ache after you see so many people each day?” “How can you possibly be so effective, when you’re not really doing much work on people?” Both clients and fellow practitioners have repeatedly asked these questions about my Bowenwork sessions and this is what I tell them: “I have been doing Bowenwork for 18 years, and I intend to be a busy bodyworker until I am an old woman!”

It's largely the unusual way in which Bowenwork is performed that allows me to assert that I'll be doing bodywork until I'm old and gray. Because of the pace of the Bowenwork protocol, I'm able to pace myself, offer more flexible scheduling for my clients, and not wear myself out doing the work.

Compared to many other bodywork modalities, Bowenwork is surprisingly gentle and minimalist in its application, and is easy to learn. Bowenwork creates a state of relaxation with minimal touch and, because of the unique nature of its moves, elicits a whole-body response. A Bowenwork session includes applying varying sets of two to six moves with two- to five-minute delays between each set, allowing the body to integrate the effects of the work. Clients do not need to be undressed; the technique can be performed effectively through light, loose clothing. Many practitioners work with clients lying on massage tables, but Bowenwork can also be done on clients who are seated.

Bowenwork can be very effective for a variety of acute and chronic health conditions. In my practice working alongside a neurologist, many of my clients have severe back pain, sciatica, neck and shoulder pain, fibromyalgia, and other complex conditions that have not been relieved by conventional treatments. With Bowenwork, I am able to offer a gentle, noninvasive way of supporting their whole body and reeducating the dysfunctional muscular and postural tension patterns that may be contributing to the discomfort.

BOWENWORK IS BORN

Bowenwork is a soft-tissue relaxation technique developed by the late Tom Bowen (1916–1982) of Geelong, Australia. Bowen was never formally trained in any health-care profession,

Bowen had a profound understanding of the innate ability of the body to heal itself and its interconnectedness, both in a structural and energetic sense.



but by closely observing people's postures and health conditions, he intuitively created a unique modality that has helped thousands of people with many different physical ailments, not necessarily just those limited to musculoskeletal conditions. Sadly, Bowen was never recognized by the chiropractic and osteopathic peers of his time. In 1973, the Victorian state government undertook a census of nonmedical health clinics and documented Bowen's clinic as seeing an estimated 13,000 people a year. Since his passing, Bowen's work (now known as Bowtech/Bowenwork) is practiced worldwide, largely due to the efforts of one of his protégés, Oswald (Ossie) Rentsch. As one of six people trained by Bowen, Rentsch documented his teacher's work and, in 1986, started teaching Bowenwork around the world, along with his wife, Elaine. To date, the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia has trained practitioners in more than 25 countries, including the United States.

Through years of exploration, Bowen identified certain areas of the body as more responsive to the application of moves than others. He had a profound understanding of the innate ability of the body to heal itself and its interconnectedness, both in a structural and energetic

sense. He discovered that minimal sets of moves could affect the whole body in a dynamic way, not just at the locations where they were applied. It is unknown whether Bowen had any instruction in other modalities, but many locations of the moves correspond with key acupuncture meridians and ayurvedic healing points, which may help to understand the energetic effects of Bowenwork. Clients often report being aware of sensations of energy moving through them during a session, similar to those experienced during acupressure or acupuncture. Observers in Bowen's clinic reported that he would sense areas of tension or dysfunction by "feeling" the energetic fields surrounding the body before deciding where to apply the moves, or when and how long to wait between sets of moves.

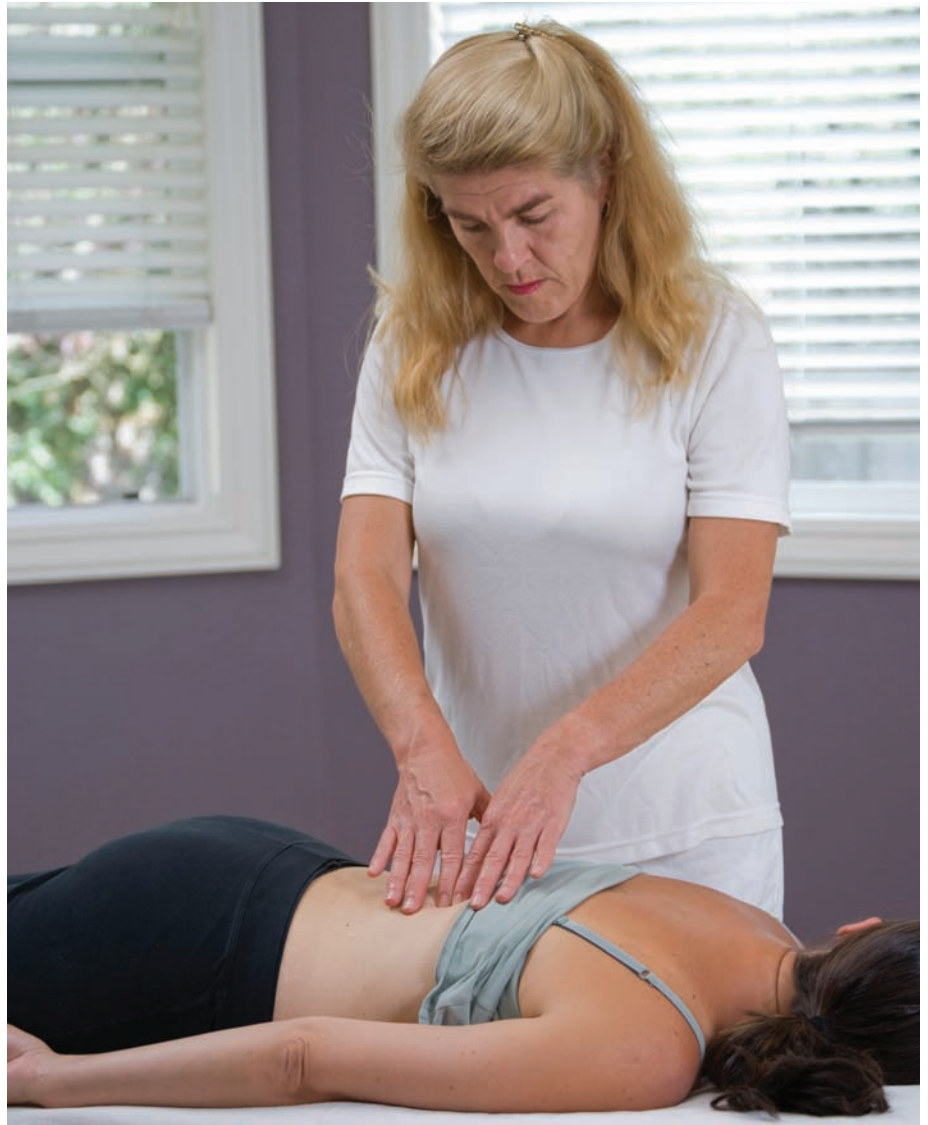
Bowen was a man of few words, and did not formally document his technique, nor give detailed explanations of how they worked. Through Rentsch, Bowen's work has been organized into sets of procedures that can be easily learned and applied to different client conditions. There are many theories to explain the possible mechanisms and actions that make Bowenwork successful. What follows

here is my own interpretation based on my understanding of proprioception and neurophysiological pathways.

HOW IT WORKS: A PARADIGM IN PROPRIOCEPTION

As bodyworkers know only too well, injury and pain can lead to various states of distress in the body. It may be acute, short term, or chronic and degenerative. Stress can trigger an overdominance of the sympathetic nervous system, which drives the fight-or-flight response. In addition to the physical discomfort they experience, many clients also complain of feeling overly stressed as a result of their condition. In contrast, under the influence of the parasympathetic nervous system, the body is in a more relaxed state and is able to heal itself, such as at rest or when asleep. In this phase, nutrients and fluids are digested and assimilated and delivered to the tissues, metabolic waste products are removed, and cells are able to repair and regenerate themselves.

Many of Bowenwork's core moves are administered over the ganglia of the autonomic nervous system. Through the proprioceptive pathways, Bowenwork can attenuate the fight-or-flight stress responses of the sympathetic nervous system, allowing clients to experience a profoundly deep sense of relaxation. Bowenwork is not only able to facilitate healing of injured muscles and tendons, but the optimal function of internal, visceral organs and tissues, too. Proprioception can be defined as the sensory means by which the brain perceives the body's orientation in space. It predicts movement of the limbs and body, without using vision.¹ This is facilitated by specialized nerve endings in tissues (proprioceptors) that, when stimulated, relay information to the spinal cord and brain.



Work on the midback area relaxes muscles, fascia, and the nervous system, as well as the abdominal organs.

Bowenwork is a system of gentle, soft-tissue “moves” performed in such a way that proprioceptors located in the skin, fascia, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joints are stimulated to relay neurological signals and reflex impulses via the peripheral nervous system (limbs and organs) to the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). The signals are registered in areas of the brain such

as the cerebellum and motor cortex, which in turn relay neurological signals that affect the stretch-length regulation (contraction and relaxation) of muscle fibers in the areas where the moves are applied, as well as adjacent tissues, too. Specific proprioceptive pathways affected by Bowenwork include activating mechanoreceptors, spindle cells, golgi tendon organs, spinal reflex arcs, and stretch reflexes.²

The Bowenwork move can be described in four distinct stages: contacting the skin, taking the slack, applying the challenge, and rolling over the tissues. The action of lightly contacting the skin, then taking the slack by stretching the skin and fascia, stimulates proprioceptive nerve cells called Meissner and Pacinian corpuscles (mechanoreceptors), which mediate the sense of touch.³ The “challenge” applies direct pressure to the spindle cells and golgi tendon organs. Then, as the practitioner rolls his or her thumbs or fingers over the muscle or tendon, a multidimensional signal is transmitted via the nerve pathways to the spine, thereby stimulating the spinal reflexes and the brain. Some Bowenwork moves are performed in conjunction with bending joints, which creates further proprioceptive signals via compression of Ruffini endings (mechanoreceptors), which in turn relays the alterations in pressure and alignment of the joints to the brain.⁴

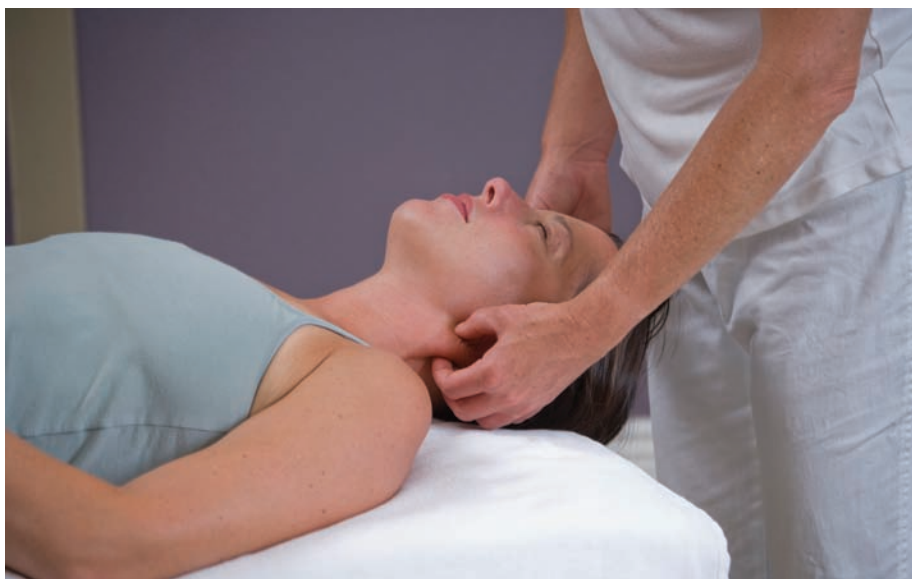
Many of the Bowenwork moves are done either at the origin, insertion, or belly of the muscles where the spindle cells and golgi tendon organs are located, so as to stimulate the spinal reflex mechanisms. This reaction results in a subtle, yet dynamic, effect in altering the resting length of muscle tissue fibers, not only at the point at which the move was made, but also within muscles of the corresponding dermatome and spinal reflex arc pathways.⁵ This explains why Bowenwork is so minimalist—only applying a few moves at a time—and able to create simultaneous relaxation responses in multiple areas of the body.

As a result of repetitive use, injury, or chronic pain, the body can accommodate abnormal states of tension and perceive them as a normal adaptation. The Bowenwork movements subtly override the state of tension in the muscles and tendons, and



The elbow/wrist procedure can address repetitive strain injuries such as epicondylitis.

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The upper respiratory procedure can help with lymphatic drainage, sinusitis, and hay fever.

Bowenwork and Women's Health

In my naturopathic practice, I often see women who are experiencing age- and hormone-related changes in their bodies. Aside from supporting them with nutrition and herbal medicine as part of my naturopathic background, I also offer Bowenwork. Changes in menstrual hormones directly affect the brain, thyroid, and adrenal glands. Prolonged stress increases cortisol levels, which can lead to weight gain, blood sugar regulation issues, sleep pattern disruption, and ultimately fatigue. Hormonal changes also affect the integrity of bone tissue, muscles, and visceral organs, such as the bladder and uterus. Many menopausal women complain of joint aches and pains, changes in bladder control, feeling weaker, and having less stamina. Through its relaxing influence on the body, Bowenwork can help to balance the nervous system, and thereby influence the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which is a major hormonal control system in the body.

Here is a case in point: A client in her mid-50s came to my office for help with weight loss, bladder weakness, occasional numbness in her hands, and sleep issues. She is an administrative assistant, spending most of her day working on a computer for a demanding boss. She was about 20 pounds overweight and felt too tired to exercise after work, so physical activities were limited to occasional walks on the weekends, depending on her mood. In her 40s, this client had a total hysterectomy. Since then, she has needed to go to the bathroom at least three times during the night and has had occasional daytime incontinence. When she laid or sat in certain positions, she would get tingling and numbness in her hands. When I assessed her, she had significant tightness in her neck and shoulders.

In the first Bowenwork session, I focused on general relaxation and supporting her bladder and adrenal glands. She was surprised at how she felt tingling throughout her body and almost fell asleep, even though the amount of work I did on her was minimal, with very light pressure. A week later, she returned and reported to me that on the night of the last session, she had slept through the entire night without having to go to the bathroom. She woke up feeling very energized and was able to take a walk for a couple of evenings after work, and the tingling and numbness in her hands had not bothered her. I did one more Bowenwork session on her and asked her to keep in touch with me. The next day, she came back to the office to tell me how much better she was feeling. Her bladder problem was gone and she was not feeling nearly as stressed at work.

In another case, a menopausal woman was referred to me by a physical therapist. The client had been diagnosed with adhesive capsulitis, a syndrome of mostly unknown causes that can include changes in the supporting tissues of, and around, the shoulder due to autoimmune, hormonal, or other systemic diseases. It results in the restriction of shoulder movement that is usually very painful.¹ The lady had no known shoulder injury, but was experiencing severe pain and limited range of motion in her left shoulder (less than 90 degree abduction). After taking a careful history, I became aware that she was a very stressed executive and was experiencing symptoms of multiple hormonal imbalances. As part of her therapeutic protocol, I suggested a series of Bowenwork sessions, wherein I focused on general relaxation, adrenal support, and her shoulder. Within two weeks, her shoulder pain settled down significantly, and after following specific Bowenwork exercises for about four more weeks, she returned to nearly 180 degrees of abduction. Her hot flashes settled down, she reported sleeping more deeply, and she was up feeling refreshed and able to cope with her work situation better.

NOTE

1. L. B. Siegel, N. J. Cohen, and E. P. Gall, "Adhesive Capsulitis: A Sticky Issue," *American Family Physician* (April 1999). Available at www.aafp.org/aafp/990401ap/1843.html (accessed February 2010).

relax the surrounding tissues, leading to improved mobility and function.

Via proprioceptive stimulation, Bowenwork moves are able to address dysfunctional motor and recruitment patterns in muscles and tendons that contribute to poor postural alignment and improve optimal posture.

FASCIAL EFFECTS

Each Bowenwork move is done at the level of the superficial fascia. Fascia plays an important role in maintaining structural integrity in the body. According to Thomas Myers, LMT, author of *Anatomy Trains*, fascial restrictions can profoundly affect postural alignment and overall health.⁶ As a result of injury or inflammation, fascia can become contracted and adhered. This increases the risk of forming scar tissue and results in restriction around the adjacent tissues. When pressure is applied to tissue, it alters the electric charge and fluid levels within the tissues.⁷ Thus, the gentle stretching and pressure applied in Bowenwork moves affect the piezoelectric potential of the fascial liquid-crystalline matrix, which can result in loosening up adhesions and enhancing circulation to the affected tissues.⁸

NOCICEPTION AND PAIN

Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage. The perception of pain in the body is mainly mediated by signals from specialized sensory receptors called nociceptors.⁹ The complex nature of Bowenwork moves alters the intensity of pain signals from nociceptors via the neural pathways to the brain and helps to decrease reactivity to the sensations. Many clients report significant relief of pain symptoms after a Bowenwork session.



Bowenwork moves are very gentle and noninvasive. They may be performed on bare skin or over light, loose clothing.

MANDATORY DELAYS

Bowen realized that the body needed time to respond to the specific neurological signals of the moves he was using in his work. He believed that a minimum of two minutes was required between sets of moves. No one knows just how he determined that, but U.S. osteopath Lawrence Jones, who developed the Strain Counterstrain Technique, has helped to substantiate Bowen's theory through research. Jones showed via electromyograph (EMG) testing, that it takes a muscle up to 90 seconds to relax once the proprioceptors and stretch reflexes have been stimulated by an impulse.¹⁰ In a Bowenwork session, the practitioner

The gentle application of Bowenwork presents little risk for developing repetitive strain injuries. ”

waits for periods of about two minutes between sets of moves to allow the client's body to integrate the neurological responses to the moves.

From a practitioner's perspective, the gentle application of Bowenwork is light on one's hands and back, and presents little risk for developing repetitive strain injuries if performed properly. The space created by the mandatory delays between sets of moves allows the practitioner to remain grounded and minimizes the potential to "absorb" the effects of clients' emotional and health issues, which can be a contributing factor to burnout in bodyworkers. The delays also encourage the client to tune in and "listen" to their own body's responses. The length of each session can vary from 20–45 minutes, which allows for

flexibility in scheduling multiple clients at one time. After the initial session, clients are encouraged to reschedule a week later for a follow up and then continue weekly until symptoms resolve. Many clients respond within the first two sessions and then return on an as-needed basis for “tune ups.”

VALUE OF BODYWORK

Due to its ability to create a sense of deep relaxation in the body, Bowenwork is a great modality for supporting clients who wish to stay well and who are proactive in addressing their health conditions. Many clients call my office for tune-up sessions. They are not suffering from any particular ailment or injury as such, but are aware that they are feeling a little more tired or tense than usual, or their sleep patterns have changed. Perhaps an old twinge or ache is starting to return due to their work or postural habits, or they just want to feel more energetic. As a naturopath and nurse who promotes wellness, I encourage my clients to come in and see me before any health concerns deteriorate and develop into “conditions.”

Bowenwork is being used in clinical health-care settings, sports facilities, corporate offices, and anywhere people need relief from tension, aches, and pains. It is safe for pregnant women, newborn babies, children, the chronically ill, and aged people, and there is also a specialized form of Bowenwork for animals.

Many of my clients find Bowenwork helpful for transitioning major life changes, emotional distress, hormonal changes, recurrent stress, headaches, and physical injuries. Bowenwork “resets” their muscles and nervous



Bowenwork may be done with the client seated, as seen with the shoulder procedure.



The forearm procedure can address carpal tunnel problems.

system and resonates with the innate ability of the body to heal and function optimally. As Bowen himself used to say: “It reminds the body that the emergency is over.” **m&b**

🗨 *Sandra Gustafson, BSN, RN, specialized in intensive care nursing until 2001. She received her nursing degree from the James Cook University in Townsville, Australia, and attended the Cairns College of Natural Therapies (Australia) to become a naturopathic practitioner. An accredited Bowenwork practitioner since 1991, Gustafson has been teaching the work since 1994. She now works in a medical and alternative therapies practice of integrative neurology and uses Bowenwork to support her clients. Actively involved in establishing the Bowenwork Academy USA, Gustafson presented this work to the integrative health faculty at Mayo Clinic in 2005 and many other medical and health support groups. Contact her at sandragustafson@bowenworkforlife.com or www.bowenworkforlife.com.*

NOTES

1. E. R. Kandel, J. H. Schwartz, and T. M. Jessell, *Principles of Neural Science*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 385.
2. *Ibid.*, 432–440.
3. *Ibid.*, 432–440.
4. *Ibid.*, 432–440.
5. *Ibid.*, 431.
6. Thomas Myers, *Anatomy Trains (PA: Churchill-Livingstone/Elsevier Limited, 2004)*, 33.
7. *Ibid.*, 15–18.
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. Kandel, *Principles of Neural Science*, 473.
10. R. Kusunose, “Strain and Counterstrain,” in: *Rational Manual Therapies (Baltimore: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 1993)*, 323–325.