

SOFT TISSUE THERAPY

Bowenwork



“BOWENWORK ENABLES ME TO offer my clients a very effective and powerful healing modality that provides results—the lighter the touch, the more powerful the healing,” states esthetician Jane Di Angelo Pardy of Silveraire Bodycare in Palm Springs, CA. Pardy is a certified esthetician, colon hydrotherapist and Bowenwork practitioner, and also has a degree in nursing.

Bowenwork, a gentle, soft tissue relaxation technique, was developed in the 1950s by the late Australian Tom

Bowen, who passed away in 1982. Based on his experiences working with sports therapists in the greater Melbourne area of Victoria, Australia, Bowen founded a unique method of working on specific points on the body, applying innovative “moves” over skin, fascia, muscles, tendons and ligaments that resulted in a rapid release of tension, postural realignment and quite often pain relief. He became so well known with his work that in 1974, a government survey of non-medical practitioners in Victoria estimated that

he worked on 13,000 people within that year. That equates to about 60 people a day at his clinic—a high volume of clients by anyone’s standards!

Bowenwork is a unique form of bodywork that involves relatively light pressure and minimal hands on contact by the practitioner compared to massage and other bodywork therapies. It incorporates sets of gentle “rolling” moves

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over muscles and soft-tissue structures, interspersed with short hands-off periods to allow the body to integrate the effects of the work. For most readers, this concept may seem antithetical for a means of achieving for relaxation. However, the effects of the Bowenwork moves and intermittent hands-off delays profoundly relax the whole body, due to its effects on the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which shifts from the freeze-fight-flight (sympathetic) mode toward the relaxing-restorative (parasympathetic) mode. A study using single-lead EKG monitors attached to subjects receiving Bowenwork sessions showed decreased heart rate variability (a sign of the nervous system relaxing away from sympathetic dominance toward parasympathetic dominance) and significant pain relief in people with fibromyalgia symptoms.

The technique works by applying specific Bowenwork "moves" that stimulate proprioceptors embedded within the fascia, muscles, tendons or ligaments that regulate tension patterns in those structures. Neurological signals are transmitted via the spinal reflexes, peripheral and central nervous system pathways that



trigger an overriding effect of the current tension patterns in the tissues, resulting in a relaxation effect on the entire body. This may occur immediately after each move, or it may happen in the few minutes after the practitioner steps away from the client to allow the process to unfold.

In essence, the Bowenwork practitioner is a facilitator, not a manipulator. By applying the moves, the practitioner gives the body specific neurological signals to relax, and then steps back for a few minutes to allow the body to "relax itself." Compared to many other bodywork techniques, Bowenwork initiates an internal response that stimulates restoration of the body's equilibrium, rather than an external approach of manipulating areas of tight muscle tension until it is released.



Bowenwork embodies a holistic healing approach by recognizing that the body has the innate capacity to heal itself, given the optimal conditions for doing so. When the body is able to relax into the parasympathetic phase, it can enhance the oxygenation, nourishing and repairing of tissues, activating the immune system to facilitate the healing processes and improving the elimination of toxic waste products.

During the hands-off integration periods, clients often report sensations of warmth in certain areas of the body, tingles running up and down the spine or limbs, muscles "unwinding," and feeling deeply relaxed. Often, loud gurgling of the intestines (peristalsis) may be heard, and some clients even fall asleep during a session!

Clients have reported that they find Bowenwork more deeply relaxing and restful than reflexology or massage ther-



apy. During the latter, the therapist is usually contacting and stimulating the body throughout the session.

Bowenwork is documented to be helpful for many health conditions; it is not limited to musculo-skeletal aches and pains. It is safe and effective for newborn babies, children, enhancing athletes' performances and recovery from injuries. It addresses the issues of people suffering from multiple health conditions, ailments of the elderly and frail and discomforts experienced by expectant mothers—even optimizing fetal positioning for birth.

From a practitioner's perspective, there are multiple advantages of using Bowenwork in a bodywork practice. First, it is not as labor intensive as massage and other forms of manual therapies. The physical exertion and consequential wear and tear on the practitioner is minimal. Bowenwork practitioners are less likely to complain about feeling "drained," since they are able to work on clients for short periods and intermittently disconnect. This reduces their likelihood of experiencing the "burnout" that other bodywork practitioners often do.

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FOR CLIENTS WHO CANNOT LIE ON A MASSAGE TABLE, BOWENWORK CAN EASILY BE ADAPTED FOR SEATED OR SEMI-RECLINED POSITIONS.

Secondly, observing the mandatory integration of time delays between the sets of moves used on each client allows the Bowenwork practitioner to work on numerous clients at a time. Some practitioners work on two or three clients simultaneously.

I have been practicing Bowenwork for 22 years. After developing a repetitive strain injury in my elbow from doing deep tissue massage in 1991, Bowenwork facilitated my recovery. Since then, I have been a busy Bowenwork practitioner without wearing myself out, sometimes seeing more than 10 clients a day!

In a spa setting, Bowenwork can be a wonderful modality for clients who are seeking relaxation and relief from aches and pains, but do not wish to remove their clothes or have oils and lotions applied to their skin. Clients can wear light, loose clothing while they are receiving Bowenwork treatments. For clients who cannot lie on a massage table, Bowenwork can easily be adapted for seated or semi-reclined positions. From a scheduling point of view, a Bowenwork practitioner can easily work on two clients within the same hour, and simultaneously provide deeply relaxing sessions for both.

Kathryn Jul Schneider, a professional Bowenwork practitioner from Easton, MD, started her career at a nationally franchised massage spa business. She offers this insight: "The basic principles I learned during my Bowenwork training (less is more, feeling for body responses, moves toward the spine for calming) changed the way I gave a massage, and my clients reported better responses."

"I can offer people so much more with Bowenwork than any other modality I have previously learned," says Wendy Daray, an esthetician and massage practitioner at Oly by Hand in Olympia, WA. "It is a no-brainer for me to recommend Bowenwork."



Many estheticians work with clients who are recovering from cosmetic surgery, have sensitive skin problems or suffer from stress and other health-related conditions. Bowenwork is an ideal modality for clients preparing for surgery, as it helps them to relax and optimize their internal bodily functions pre-operatively, and supporting them with post-operative recovery by reducing swelling, bruising and pain through very gentle touch.

In particular, women who have undergone treatment for breast cancer (chemotherapy, radiation and surgery) and reconstruction surgery have experienced beneficial support from incorporating Bowenwork into their health program. They experienced fewer unpleasant side effects from radiation and chemotherapy sickness, less lymphatic congestion and more energy. In addition, their bodies healed faster after treatments.



Pardy finds that pairing Bowenwork with colon hydrotherapy is very beneficial in helping her clients feel more relaxed throughout their session. Clients who used to require frequent chiropractic adjustments for postural alignment have reported being able to sustain their adjustments for much longer periods after Bowenwork sessions.

Estheticians and bodywork practitioners are in a unique position to develop long-term customer-relationships with their regular clients, who often seek their advice on how to support their well-being. Bowenwork is not only a great option for pain and tension relief, it is also a wonderful modality to maintain mobility, flexibility and general wellness. As Bowenworkers often say, "Everybody is better with Bowenwork!" ■

Photography by Andrew J. Hathaway, ajhphoto@gmail.com

Sandra Gustafson is a registered nurse and a holistic health consultant. She has used Bowenwork in her practice for 22



years. Originally from Australia, she now works in an integrative medical practice in Santa Rosa, CA. Gustafson learned about

Bowenwork when she sought relief from a repetitive strain injury of her elbow in 1991, and the profound and long-lasting effects inspired her to learn more.