

Healing Power of a Gentle Touch

How Does it Work?

It's a system of gentle and relaxing muscle manipulation designed to stimulate the body's innate healing ability. Practitioners use a specific set of gentle, rolling massage movements with their forefingers and thumbs on precise points on the body.

The theory is that these rolling motions trigger impulses in the brain to stimulate healing, release blocked energy and improve blood flow and lymphatic drainage.

The treatment originated in Australia in the fifties. It was developed by Thomas A Bowen (1916 – 1982), a cement plant worker in Geelong, Victoria, Australia, after he observed a manipulator treating other colleagues with back pain. He established his own technique and set up his own clinic after realising certain movements were particularly effective in relieving pain.

The Bowen technique is not a constant hands-on therapy like massage. One of its most distinguishing characteristics is that these gentle movements are interspersed with regular pauses when a practitioner will step away from the patient and briefly leave the room.

"It allows the body time to respond to what's been done," says Janie Godfrey, a Bowen therapist who has a practice in Frome, Somerset (01373 836 982).

"You do a small set of rolling movements then leave the room. It's to allow the brain time to take note of the stimulation it's been sent rather than constantly giving more and more."

The amount of time a therapist recommends between sessions and the number of times they leave the room during them will vary from patient to patient.

"A session is tailor-made to the person, not just from session to session but from moment to moment, according to how they respond," says Janie.

What Is It Good For?

The technique can help a whole range of problems including muscle and joint pain, sports injuries, back pain, PMS, other menstrual problems, stress, high blood pressure, hayfever, arthritis, MS and migraine. In a study for the Migraine Action Association, 80 per cent of volunteers who tried the Bowen technique noticed their attacks were less frequent and severe.

"It confirms that this gentle, non-invasive, holistic therapy can help a wide range of migraine sufferers," says Ann Turner, director of the Migraine Action Association.

How Else Can It Help?

Bowen is also especially effective in treating frozen shoulder, tennis elbow and repetitive strain injury (RSI).

Frozen shoulder causes extreme pain when you reach to pick something up or try to make wide movements.

In a study by the European College of Bowen Studies based in Frome, 100 people with frozen shoulders were given Bowen treatments for 18 months while a control group of a further 100 sufferers were given a general massage. On average, the Bowen treatment group found their shoulder flexibility improved by 23 degrees compared with eight degrees in the control group.

"The therapy allows practitioners to release the tension in the muscle," says Janie. "It can relieve the pain quickly and effectively and movement is less restricted."

The European College of Bowen Studies is now conducting a year's study on asthma volunteers. Some practitioners have also had good results treating infertility.

What Can You Expect?

If you decide to go for a treatment, a practitioner will begin by taking your case history. They will ask why you've decided to try the Bowen technique and question you about your health, diet and lifestyle.

"A practitioner will also observe your posture and look at any areas that are bothering you," says Janie. "If you have frozen shoulder, for example, they'll establish how restricted your movement is."

The treatment can be given through light clothing. Usually you'll be asked to lie face down on a massage table but, if necessary, it can be done seated.

A practitioner will usually start at the lower back, lightly touching your body with small rolling movements using their thumbs and forefingers.

"It's profoundly relaxing," says Janie. "It's a very light pressure. People often say they feel like they're sinking into the mattress. Others nod off."

Don't be surprised when the practitioner quietly leaves the room several times throughout the session to give your body time to respond.

"A practitioner will try not to plan the whole session because it may well change according to how your body reacts," says Janie. "People have a range of reactions during a session. Some say they can still feel your fingers touching them even though you've left the room. Others talk about waves of warmth up their legs. One migraine sufferer told me she felt glitter over her head. People give practitioners wonderful descriptions."

"On average a practitioner will leave the room for two minutes but it varies. If someone suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome it would be longer. By contrast children need no breaks because their brains take on board the information so well and so quickly."

Each session lasts 40 to 60 minutes. Some conditions are permanently improved after just one treatment, but most require two to three sessions and the amount of time left between sessions varies, too.

"Children and pregnant women could be treated almost every day," says Janie. "If you're treating an elderly patient you might wait two weeks between sessions because an older body takes longer to respond."

Patients often find relief from ailments other than those for which they're seeking help because Bowen treats the whole body.

"People leave with a feeling of deep relaxation," says Janie. "Some of them may think: 'What a waste of money. I was hardly touched at all and the practitioner was always out of the room', but when you see them again they're stunned by the improvement."

Janey Lee Grace in 'Express Woman'