

Pain – The Effect of Bowen on Pain and Anxiety

By Alastair Rattray, Bowen Teacher and Therapist

Tom Bowen, an Australian living and working in Geelong, New South Wales, developed his remarkable technique over some 35 years. He described himself as a "muscular-skeletal" therapist and regarded himself as an osteopath though he had never had any formal medical training. Probably 95% of Tom's clients were suffering from some form of muscular-skeletal problems. He was evidently very skilled as it was estimated in 1974 that he was treating thousands of people a year, often fixing the problem in one to three treatments.

What has become apparent as we work on a greater variety of cases than just those suffering from muscular problems is that Tom's therapy seems to work on three different levels. The first one is obviously the muscular and skeletal level. Many a bad back and misaligned pelvis has been sorted out successfully using Bowen. A research project on frozen shoulders concluded that Bowen was very successful at relaxing the muscles around the shoulder even when they had remained in spasm for 8 years or so. Children with asthma respond very positively to Bowen. Some research on lymphoedema cases showed that many responded well to this gentle treatment. So that level could be regarded as the "base" level at which the Bowen Technique works.

At a second level could be regarded the body's systems. In more than one case, we have experienced a remarkable turnaround in chronic infection for instance. In one, infection had remained constant for over 18 months with antibiotics being prescribed every 3 months which merely had the effect of reducing the infection from "100%" to 70% before it would steadily return to its maximum state. Yet one week after the first Bowen treatment it reduced to 50% and a week later to nil and has not returned in two years. At this level the effects of the treatment seem to be affecting much more than just the muscular systems. In another case, chronic infection of the right sinus for over two and a half years was resolved in about four weeks where the client had been taking 6 Anadin a day. She stopped the medication almost immediately. At this level, the body's systems seem to gain a boost to get the immune system balanced and working properly to defend the body as it should.

The third level could be described as the emotional level. At this level, it is not that the relief of pain brings emotional relief but that the emotions are affected even when there is no pain at all. It is quite common for clients to say how very relaxed they feel after a Bowen treatment. But the effects of the treatment at this level do not stop there. Working for over two years at the Blenheim Project in Portobello Road, West London which provides support and a "drop in" centre for people with drug and drink problems, it has become very clear over a number of cases that the effects of Bowen on the emotional level can be very marked indeed, and last for a long time. In one case, a client of the Blenheim for many years, the management realised a very marked change in behaviour and social contact had taken place after only two Bowen treatments. This client was described as one "everyone avoided" and yet suddenly they found they could have a rational discussion with her. This state has continued for over two years. The client also reduced her intake of valium to nil over a period of some eight months with regular Bowen treatments.

In another case, a woman who had chronic back pain, which had been increasing over a 12-year period, also suffered from deep depression and was often ill. The back pain was resolved in two treatments. The frequent periods of illness also stopped immediately and after some months she wrote, "the Bowen treatment seems to have had a marked effect on my general health, with practically no illness all winter, and also my mental/emotional health is also much better. I don't have the down days and depression that I suffered with for years".

One of the most common statements clients at the Blenheim make after their first treatment is that they may have suffered the same levels of stress during the week but that they had been able to cope much better and could "see what had to be done, and did it whereas I would usually do nothing about it". This has been seen often with other types of cases. A client suffering very severely from "Panic Attacks" to a level that any crisis would mean her being off work for two days or more, (she was the Company Secretary with legal responsibility for the company). After two Bowen treatments, she was very much brighter and coping better. After about three treatments she arrived to say that she had had a big crisis in the morning and had thought "well, I had better deal with it then!". In total, she made six visits to make sure she was fine. She came back about six months later during a personal crisis for a couple more, but has been fine for a year now.

A couple came for Bowen treatment to help them through the crisis, which had just engulfed their lives. The husband had been diagnosed with a cancerous growth, about the size of a large lemon, on the edge of his ribs. Diagnosis had taken over 8 weeks and radiotherapy could not be scheduled in less than another two months. Both were in a high state of anxiety over the situation. During the first visit, the wife burst in to tears during the treatment as the pent-up tension over the previous months was released. On their next visit, they both said that they had found they were coping much better and were able to discuss the situation together without emotional collapse. When they came for their fourth visit, they explained that he had just had a scan, prior to having a week's chemotherapy to try to stop the growth getting any larger. Quite extraordinarily, the hospital could no longer identify the location of the growth as it had disappeared except for a very small spot. The only treatment he had had was Bowen. Cancer can disappear of its own accord in this way, but this obviously was outside the hospital's experience according to the couple. It may be that the calming effect of Bowen allowed the immune system to fight back, but we will never really know. One thing is certain; they are both very much calmer and coping very well with the situation. So far, no further sites of cancer have been identified and all treatments for the disease have been completed.

The Bowen Technique is a very gentle therapy where the therapist makes gentle moves over muscles or tendons in very specific places on the body. It is not like any other technique though there are sometimes similarities in the sites where the therapist works. A unique feature is the two-minute breaks between sets of moves to allow the body to begin its work. The "disturbances" caused by the moves are unusual and cause the brain to investigate the area and to release tension which may have built up in the muscles for some reason. However, the effects of the technique go way beyond just treating muscles in spasm and affect other levels of the body's systems. As it is the body itself which is doing the work, usually, once something is fixed, it stays fixed as the therapist is not manipulating, nor imposing their will on the client. A feeling of well-being is probably the most common sensation felt by clients after a treatment. It follows, therefore, that this well-being affects the level of anxiety felt by all clients to one degree or another in a positive way. It is also a feature of the Bowen Technique that the re-balancing, which is started by the treatment, continues throughout the following week, and often well beyond that as has been seen by some of the cases referred to in this paper. While we may be treating a bad back, for instance, we are also affecting other levels of the body's systems even to the level of how they feel generally and how they even behave. It is no small wonder, therefore, that the technique is being used in an ever-widening range of cases. It is totally safe and easy to use on anyone whatever their condition or their age which is probably why more and more professionals, including doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, osteopaths, chiropractors and other therapists have been coming to learn the Bowen Technique.

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