

# Bowenwork: Gentle Healing Through the Autonomic Nervous System

by *Yvonne Fisher, CMT and Liz Mackenzie, Ph.D.*

At the urging of a friend, a carpenter who had experienced unrelenting shoulder pain for over two years decided to try Bowenwork for relief. During the Bowenwork session he laid on a massage table, but the experience was not like a massage or any other bodywork he'd experienced. The practitioner would apply gentle pressure to very specific points on his body and then leave the room for several minutes. The entire hour was a series of these moves on his back, legs and neck, each followed by a short waiting period. The carpenter felt very relaxed, but because the work was so subtle, he left with little expectation of change.

To his surprise, however, the carpenter awakened the next morning with no shoulder pain. When he got to work and began using his hammer, the shoulder pain came back every bit as intensely as before, but he worked through it as he always had. Once he finished working though, he was pain free again and he slept well. Each day during the week after his Bowenwork session, he awoke pain free, and each day it took a little longer for the pain to come back into his shoulder as he worked. The pain was always gone by the evening. By week's end, it was almost time to leave work before the pain returned. After his second Bowenwork session, he only had a small amount of pain in that shoulder, and this only when he was doing the most strenuous work. This is one of thousands of such success stories, and is typical of the experiences of people undergoing Bowenwork.

## **What is Bowenwork and why have so few of us heard of it?**

Tom Bowen created what came to be known as Bowenwork in Australia in the 1950's. This soft tissue technique helps balance the system so that the body can then begin to heal itself. Bowen successfully treated thousands of clients until his death in 1982. He also trained six persons in his technique, one of whom – Ossie Rentsch – spent 8 years documenting Bowenwork procedures and outcomes. Rentsch was the first person trained by Tom Bowen to teach the technique as Bowenwork or The Bowen Technique ([www.bowtech.com](http://www.bowtech.com)) and is the Director of the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia.

The basic philosophy behind Bowenwork is that the human body is “hard-wired” to seek balance through the regulatory process of the Autonomic Nervous System. Bowenwork seeks to affect positive change through this system. Focus on the Autonomic Nervous System allows an integrated response that can affect not just the muscle and connective tissue, but the internal organs as well. The idea is to put *just enough* information into the body to trigger the body’s own innate capacity to restore balance. The change is therefore brought about from within the body and tends to result in greater and longer lasting benefits.

Bowenwork has been observed to rebalance the nervous system, loosen tense or scarred fascia, normalize joint function, and stimulate acupuncture points, among other things. The work itself is non-invasive and subtle, yet deeply relaxing. With the very first moves the body is taken out of a stress response to a state of “rest and digest,” where healing can occur.

Bowenwork benefits everybody, from those interested in prevention and maintenance of optimal health to those dealing with chronic pain and restriction. Due to the gentleness of the touch it is an ideal form of bodywork for infants and children, pregnant women and the elderly. It is also an excellent choice for TMJ (temporo-mandibular joint) problems, as well as old injuries that have left the area “frozen” or fixed in a compensating pattern. Other conditions for which Bowenwork is considered appropriate include:

- Anxiety and stress-related tension
- Back pain, sciatica
- Colic in newborns
- Digestive and bowel issues (e.g., IBS)
- Fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome
- Gynecological conditions (painful periods, infertility)
- Headaches and migraines
- Hormonal imbalances
- Joint problems and injuries
- Post-operative recovery

- Respiratory conditions
- Repetitive strain injuries (e.g. carpal tunnel syndrome)
- Sports injuries and whiplash

A typical Bowenwork session is conducted with the client clothed and lasts from 20 to 60 minutes. Pauses at intervals during the session give the body time to integrate the new information and allow releases to fully unfold. The session itself is just the starting point for change that can take place in the body for days or weeks afterward. In fact, this part of the technique is so important, clients are advised to wait a full five days before engaging in any other kind of manipulative therapy (chiropractic, massage, acupuncture, e.g.), as well as to avoid extremes of temperature (hot baths, cold pools, hot or cold packs, etc.). This ensures that the body is able to take full advantage of the therapeutic changes set in motion by the Bowenwork session.

Bowenwork practitioners are becoming easier to find as the technique grows in popularity. A practitioner directory can be found at [www.bowenworkacademyusa.com](http://www.bowenworkacademyusa.com).

*Yvonne Fisher, CMT, of Insight Body Therapies ([www.insightbodytherapies.com](http://www.insightbodytherapies.com)) in Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania has been practicing this unique technique since 2005. A nationally certified massage therapist, Yvonne specializes in Bowenwork. She can be reached at 215 206-5074 or [insightbodytherapies@gmail.com](mailto:insightbodytherapies@gmail.com).*