

# Bowenwork

## Gentle Touch, Impressive Results

by Sandra Gustafson, R.N.

Bowenwork is a gentle, soft-tissue relaxation technique. It is an unusual form of bodywork, in that the moves are performed in specific locations on the body, followed by pauses of several minutes between sets of moves, to allow the body to integrate the effects of the work.

“I love being a Bowenwork practitioner because Bowenwork respects and inspires the body’s intelligence,” explained Robin Sandberg of Oakland, California. “The way that we support and utilize the body’s own brilliance and capacity to heal makes a huge leap toward fast and permanent recovery.”

Light-pressure stimulation to muscles, tendons and fascia, as well as gentle rolling actions over the tissues, initiate nerve reflex signals, triggering responses not only at the site of the moves but throughout the whole body. More specifically, Bowenwork resets dysfunctional tissue-tension patterns by stimulating proprioceptors, such as spindle cells, golgi-tendon bodies and ruffini mechanoreceptors, embedded in muscles, tendons, fascia and joints, resulting in changes in the stretch-length of muscle fibers and joint realignment, via spinal reflexes and the central nervous system.

Some Bowenwork moves are performed on either side of the spine, directly affecting autonomic nervous system ganglia and resetting fight-flight stress patterns. The client progressively becomes relaxed within a short period of time during a session. Clients also usually report feeling a deep and profound sense of relaxation, and often fall asleep during a session.

### Development of the technique

Bowenwork was developed by the late Tom Bowen of Australia, from the 1950s until 1982, when he

passed away. He had a unique method of helping people recover from musculoskeletal discomforts and injuries, and a variety of health conditions were often resolved with his unusual approach.

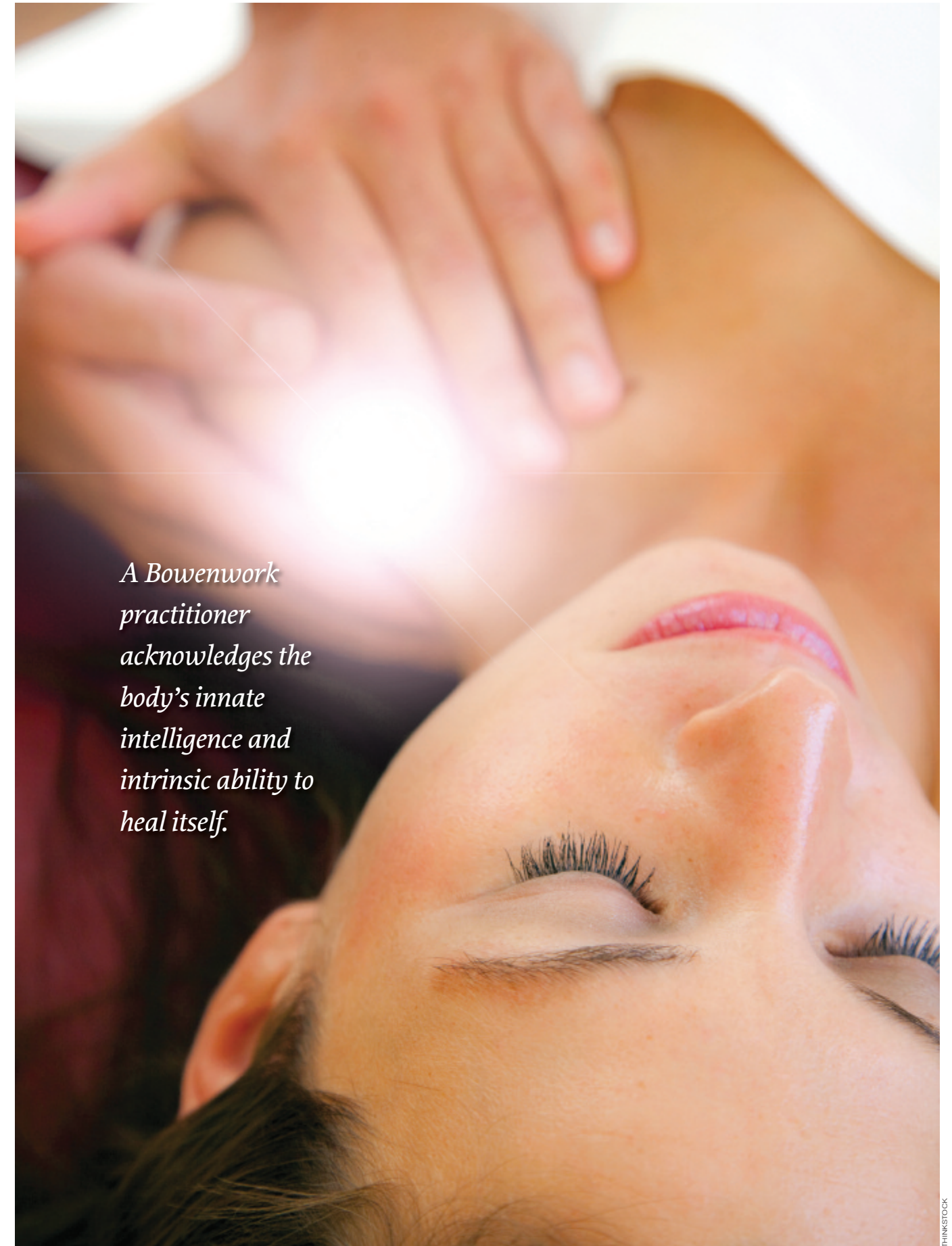
His informal bodywork training was largely inspired during his 20s and 30s when he observed and worked with sports therapists and trainers in the greater Melbourne area. This led him to explore and develop his own technique, which, after his death, became known as Bowen Therapy, Bowtech or Bowenwork, and is now practiced in many countries around the world.

Bowen was renowned for his ability to help people with health problems that had often not resolved with conventional medical, chiropractic, osteopathic or other treatments. He was an altruistic person, and would often work with babies, children, people with disabilities and local community sports and service people, free of charge.

### Today’s practitioner

A Bowenwork practitioner acknowledges the body’s innate intelligence and intrinsic ability to heal itself. The concept of minimal touch is central to Bowenwork, and clients are often surprised to receive only a few sets of moves, along with several pauses for the work to integrate, and experience noticeable benefits.

In creating a state of relaxation, the Bowenwork practitioner facilitates a deep internal process within



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the client's body. Heart and breathing rates have been observed to slow down, and intestinal peristalsis is often audible. Bowenwork initiates a process within the body to return to its optimal point of homeostasis, encouraging the resetting of abnormal tension patterns and postural imbalances, restoring optimal organ function, detoxifying and eliminating waste products, and improving lymph drainage, oxygenation and blood circulation to tissues.

These actions do not necessarily all occur during a session, and responses can occur rapidly or over a number of days after the session, as the body is able to, depending on the severity and chronicity of the problem.

### A touch of energy

Compared with techniques like reiki or Therapeutic Touch, Bowenwork is not specifically energy work;

however, Bowenwork practitioners are very aware of the body's energy field, and the interaction between the client and practitioner can yield subtle sensations and vibrations throughout the client's body that may feel like energy shifts.

Bowenwork practitioners are trained to develop a high level of tissue-tension sensitivity and tune into nonverbal body language that can inform them of their client's state of energy and responses to the work.

The Bowenwork practitioner has the client's optimal wellness at heart, but is not intentionally inducing energy effects during a session.

### Hands on, hands off

Bowenwork is different to massage in the way the work is applied. Massage is generally a hands-on technique with the massage therapist almost constantly

in touch with the client's body for the duration of the session, whereas Bowenwork is a combination of minimal, light moves over the tissues, interspersed with hands-off periods, to allow the client to relax and respond. The Bowenwork practitioner usually leaves the room or steps away from the client during these periods.

Massage therapy involves the therapist intentionally seeking tension and trigger points within muscles and then applying various massage methods and stretches in order to release them. A Bowenwork practitioner applies light, rolling moves over specific areas on the body, not necessarily at the point of pain or tension, and then allows the body to release tension patterns in varying areas, within its own time.

Bowenwork is usually performed as a stand-alone procedure, not incorporated with other bodywork techniques. This is to keep the subtle work clear from other influences and enable both the client and practitioner to determine the client's progress.

Bowenwork is usually performed over loose clothing, without the use of lotions or oils. This often appeals to clients who may be shy about exposing their bodies, or do not wish to have oils or lotions applied.

Many clients cannot lie comfortably on massage tables, and Bowenwork can be performed with clients seated in a chair, wheelchair or seated-massage chair.

### Benefits of Bowenwork

Aside from creating effective relaxation and reducing clients' stress levels, Bowenwork has the capacity to address a wide range of health issues. Bowenwork practitioners have a saying: "Everybody is better with Bowenwork!" It may be used for acute or chronic musculoskeletal aches and pains, and decreased joint range of motion. It is particularly effective in helping people recover from frozen shoulder, neck and lower back pain, sciatica, sports injuries and surgery.

"I am a retired physician who had to leave a very busy family practice due to arthritis and spinal stenosis, requiring spinal fusion," said Karen Brungardt, D.O. "I really missed helping people get better and feel healthier.

"Some years after retirement, I was introduced to Bowenwork," she continued. "I was feeling so much better from the four sessions I had received—which relieved me from my chronic pain about 90 percent—that I could be involved in a lot of activities in my retirement community."

About two years later, Brungardt had a second spinal fusion and a month later, a knee scope. The scope left a ball of fluid in her knee joint. "I decided to return for more Bowenwork, and again, the chronic pain was

**Bowenwork resets dysfunctional tissue-tension patterns by stimulating proprioceptors.**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SANDRA GUSTAFSON, F.T.N.

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**The technique is well-suited for clients with chronic pain or fibromyalgia, fragile and elderly people, and babies and children.**

hugely reduced and the fluid in my knee went away completely," she recalled

Since Bowenwork directly affects the nervous system, many internal health conditions, such as headaches, breathing and digestive problems, menstrual irregularities and circulation problems, can be helped. It is well-suited for clients who cannot tolerate deep-tissue bodywork, such as those with chronic pain, fibromyalgia, fragile or elderly people, babies and children.

Bowenwork is a wonderful complement for expectant mothers in minimizing some of the discomforts of pregnancy, promoting optimal fetal positioning and preparing the mother for birth. For newborns, Bowenwork can help with relieving colic, constipation, breastfeeding and settling babies into healthy sleeping patterns.

**Bowenwork as self-care**

For many practitioners, Bowenwork's appeal is the degree of ease by which it is performed and the minimal strain to the practitioner's body, with much less exertion than deep-tissue bodywork.

Bowenwork practitioners can enjoy a long-term bodywork career without placing undue stress on their bodies, or burning out after a few years. Since Bowenwork is performed by applying sets of moves with delay intervals in between, Bowenwork practitioners can comfortably schedule two to three clients at a time in different treatment rooms and see many more clients in a day than one could with massage therapy.

In 1991, I developed elbow tendonitis from doing deep-tissue massage. After successful treatments with Bowenwork, the problem resolved and I have been a busy Bowenwork practitioner for 21 years, without any further occupational injuries.

**Training**

Bowenwork is taught by instructors from the Bowenwork Academy USA, which offers classes throughout the U.S. The courses comprise 12 modules, each of them two days, or 16 hours, long.

Some recommended books on Bowenwork include *The*

*Little Bowen Book*, by Louise Tremblay; *Understanding the Bowen Technique* and *Bowen Technique: The Inside Story*, both by John Wilks.


More information about training, and all of the books noted above, are available at [www.bowenworkacademyUSA.com](http://www.bowenworkacademyUSA.com).

**Venues**

Many massage therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, personal trainers, chiropractors, doctors, nurses and other health care practitioners have found numerous ways to introduce Bowenwork into their practices. Sports and personal trainers use Bowenwork to optimize their clients' athletic performance, and in the event that they become injured, use the technique to accelerate healing and recovery to resume their activities.

Many clients who have required frequent chiropractic adjustments find they maintain postural alignments for longer periods of time by incorporating Bowenwork sessions into their self-care. Nurses have found ways to use Bowenwork within many clinical settings where they can offer light, gentle touch to patients, in bed or seated, to encourage relaxation and pain relief. Hospice-care nurses have reported the benefits of Bowenwork in supporting terminally ill patients feel more comfortable, as well as providing respite for caregivers, too.

"Bowenwork has a low impact on my body and my clients, with tremendous results," said massage therapist Michael Schreiber, L.M.T., of Springdale, Arkansas. "It is exciting detective work, and rewards with positive physical and emotional changes and joy returned to the client."

Sandra Gustafson is a California-licensed registered nurse, holistic health consultant, Bowenwork practitioner and Bowenwork instructor. She works in an integrative medical practice, seeing clients with many different health issues and, in particular, chronic degenerative conditions like chronic pain and fibromyalgia. 

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