

When less is more

Debbie Malina explains how the Bowen Technique can help dancers and also speaks to Isobel Knight, a practitioner of the Technique

This non-manipulative approach to bodywork is a relatively new form of complementary therapy which has only been available in the UK since 1993. Despite this fact, Bowen has steadily been gaining in popularity, and has much to offer dancers looking for a gentle holistic approach to healing.



The Technique was first developed in Australia during the 1950s by Tom Bowen, a labourer living in Victoria. Although Bowen possessed no formal training or qualifications in any kind of therapy, his love of sports and football had led him to take a close interest in massage and soft tissue manipulation. Over a number of years he carefully observed how specific “moves” made by physiotherapists working on the body’s soft tissues, could result in particular effects.

Bowen went on to develop his own form of bodywork technique, treating friends and colleagues from the front room of a house. Word spread, and by 1974 Bowen was treating many thousands of patients each year. Rather than communicating verbally with his patients, Bowen mostly preferred to work intuitively, using his fingers to supply any information he needed in order to assess and give treatment.

Although Bowen never wrote about his Technique, he did allow a few osteopaths and chiropractors to watch him at work and study his methods. One such individual was Oswald Rentsch, a massage therapist, who was authorised by Bowen, during his later years, to document his system. When Bowen died in 1982, Rentsch began to incorporate the Bowen Technique into his own therapy, and later that decade went on to train practitioners in New Zealand, the US and the UK.

Over the years, practitioners of the Bowen Technique have put forward a number of theories in attempting to explain how this therapy works. The Technique is thought to stimulate energy flow within the body, which is then able to heal itself and restore harmony. One school of thought believes all the body’s cells vibrate at a particular frequency; when this “vibrational energy” is blocked or depleted, the body’s self-healing mechanism no longer functions, resulting in disease or malfunction. Bowen therapists believe only a small adjustment is required to re-harmonise this balance.

When considering whether to receive treatment from a Bowen practitioner it is important to understand this is not a form of manipulative therapy. Neither is it massage, osteopathy, chiropractice or acupressure.

Patients will be asked some questions about their health at an initial consultation, although therapists prefer not to be given too much information, since they have been trained to treat each person and their problems, as intuitively as possible. Treatment is usually applied to patients while they are lying on a soft massage bed, although, if preferred, they can be seated on a chair, or in almost any situation when necessary.



Most parts of the body may be worked on, from the face down to the feet, and treatment is applied either directly onto the skin or through light clothing. Practitioners work with their index fingers and thumbs, applying small rolling movements over the muscles around tendons and ligaments. Using loose skin, the therapist will move their thumbs over muscle fibres, without the use of any hard or prolonged pressure, the movements are very gentle and often the patient is not aware of them.

While the movements used are very delicate, they are also extremely precise – one move can affect the entire system. Bowen works on the premise of minimal intervention for maximum results. Therapists may treat the entire body or target specific problem areas. They will be able to identify stress which builds up in particular muscle groups using Bowen to facilitate its release.

Bowen therapists believe the therapy works by stimulating receptors around the body, which send signals to the brain to release tension. For this reason, between every two to four moves, the therapist will leave the room for a few minutes, enabling the brain to absorb new information. Most people find that the treatment gives a deep sense of overall relaxation.

Each session will last between 30 to 40 minutes and a complete course of treatment will generally require three visits. While Bowen is complementary to other forms of medical treatment, you should not undertake any manipulative therapy immediately after a Bowen session since its effectiveness could then be undermined; you will mostly be advised to wait a week before doing so.

While Bowen can be used by anyone of any age, it is particularly helpful in the treatment of sports injuries and improving joint mobility, as well as enabling the body to deal with psychological and emotional issues.

“One of the best features of Bowen, from the patient’s point of view, is the fact that the period of treatment is so quick, consequently, therapists have a very high turnover of clients!” comments Isobel Knight who practises the Bowen Technique at two clinics in London.

“Although I never worked as a professional ballet dancer, having originally trained as a school teacher” explains Isobel “I had spent many years dancing. Unfortunately, I also suffered from a niggling back injury for ten years, and, despite visiting physiotherapists and osteopaths, the pain remained. One osteopath I attended, however, was also a Bowen therapist and he suggested I try the Technique.

“From the beginning of my treatment I found its effect was remarkable, and fairly quickly noticed an improvement of the symptoms. This very positive experience prompted a career change into bodywork a few years ago and in 2003 I qualified as a Bowen therapist through the UK branch of the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia. Along the way I gained experience by working for the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, the Council for Dance Education and Training and also assisted a children’s dance teacher for a year.

“The Technique may be used to solve either chronic problems or help out in situations where first-aid is required. Both can be very helpful for dancers, but Bowen may also play a preventative role if a dancer is prone to a particular injury. A wide range of dance-related problems may be treated by the therapy, including pelvic imbalance, back problems and shin splints. Sports and dance injuries often tend to stem from two main areas, the pelvis and the jaw. It is surprising how many seemingly unrelated problems can be traced back to either of these parts of the body.

“Although it is usually said that Bowen should not be mixed with other forms of physical therapies, as far as dancers are concerned, if they have been given exercises by a physiotherapist, these can be integrated. Obviously a dancer is not going to be in a position to avoid exercise altogether! However, when there are any concerns with a problem I will direct them to their GP. In the same way, if no improvement is seen after a few sessions, I will suggest they visit a specialist.

“In general, there are few injuries I would not consider treating. Bowen is so gentle it simply does not cause further damage. People often come to me with several problems; in this situation the body will prioritise and work to its own agenda. Perhaps energy levels might need topping up, here it is important for therapists to use their experience in ascertaining how much treatment would be suitable. A little Bowen can go a long way, and if you have low energy levels, the body cannot always deal with too much at once.

“Bowen, I believe, works through the muscle feedback mechanism and it taps into the body’s own healing abilities, it knows how to help itself with the right information. For example, where a patient has a knee problem, I will treat the sound knee since this will act as a blue-print. Following treatment the body will continue to make changes over four to five days, and even for some time after will try to deal with old problems. Unless there is a new injury after receiving treatment any changes should be maintained and you will only need an occasional top-up.

“Effects, if felt at all, vary from person to person. Most people do not encounter any problems, and in general I do not like to predict how any one person might react, as that could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Should there be any discomfort this may be helped by taking an over-the-counter pain-killer, or using the homeopathic remedy Arnica; such effects should disappear in a few days.

“Part of the skill of a Bowen therapist lies in the ability to be intuitive as to the treatment that each patient needs. Feedback from the patient, following an initial session, is also helpful. Treatment can be very powerful and the therapist needs to maintain their full concentration, even during those periods between moves when they leave the room. Accuracy is paramount as the treatment has to be very precise.

“While it would certainly be useful for a dancer if they were able to find a Bowen therapist who has experience of working with dance or sports injuries, this is not essential. Any Bowen therapist should be able to help them, bearing in mind all patients will be treated holistically, therapists are trained to look at the person and not just their symptoms.

“In my view, dancers should be open-minded about the therapy, and see what happens, especially if they have a long-standing problem which has not responded to other treatment. Most patients seem to need between three and four sessions, although sometimes that can be either more or less, depending on how long they have been suffering from their condition.

“Recommendation by word-of-mouth seems to be how most people learn about us. In the UK, at present, there are approximately 500 Bowen therapists, while there is also a growing number in training. Bowen, along with many other forms of complementary therapy today, is working towards attaining a national standard which will enable patients to feel confident in their choice of any Bowen therapist.”

Isobel Knight charges £50 per session for adults and £35 for students in Central London. Visit www.bowenworks.org, email therapy@bowenworks.org, or call Isobel Knight directly on 07947 475082. The Bowen Association of the UK was established in 1997 and is the European arm of the Bowen Therapy Academy of Australia. It is a member of the British Complementary Medicine Association. For more information visit www.bowen-technique.co.uk or call 0700 2698324, Monday to Friday 9.00am – 1.00pm.