

Bowenwork Alone on the Day “Why?” by Alexia Monroe

Many people ask, “Why is it so important that Bowenwork not be mixed with other modalities on the same day?” Sometimes students or clients perceive this guideline as self-serving for the Bowen therapist, or narrow-minded within the Bowen world, or simply unimportant. They say, “But I have been mixing Bowenwork with massage (or Reiki, or acupuncture, or...) and I have gotten results -- so what’s the problem?”

The fact is, many people never learn what Bowenwork can really do to stimulate healing in the body, because they do not explore Tom Bowen’s approach in enough depth to truly understand it. Mr. Bowen’s approach is radical in our modern-day world. Western society is sure that “more is better”, that we must “work” to produce an effect, and that “time is money”. We hear Mr. Bowen’s insight into the healing capacity of the body described as “less is more”, but what does that mean?

“Less is more” means to do just enough in one session to start the healing process cascading in the body, and then allow the messages to continue to integrate for 5 or more days. In the Eastern world, expertise in many areas is shown by restraint, by doing less to produce a finer result, from acupuncture to martial arts. The temptation to “add more” is replaced by the insight to “eliminate the excess”. Discrimination borne of experience gets straight to the essence of the work.

Before answering the question, “Why not combine?” let’s review Mr Bowen’s perspective, as it informs the answer. We do a few moves, then leave the room for a few minutes to allow the brain time to respond to the messages. As we gain experience, we notice that the time needed to integrate the moves varies depending upon a person’s sensitivity, general health, and which areas have been traumatized, so are protected and

slower to unwind.

We do not converse during the session, because we must allow the brain to leave the beta electrical pattern of thinking and speaking, and relax into the “rest and repair” brainwave pattern of the alpha rhythm and beyond. We allow the brain to release its protective response and move into a state of parasympathetic trust. We enter and leave the room without disturbing this mind-body journey into inner space (which is as infinite as outer space...). If that is not possible, we stay quiet and unobtrusive across the room. If we must speak to give a direction, we ideally use a soothing tone, slowing our rhythm to match that of the client in “the zone”.



We continue the session until we observe or estimate “the first major energy change” in the client, as Ossie quotes Mr. Bowen. That may be a profound relaxation after a protected area releases; the client may seem “gone” into an inner space deeper than sleep. Or we may notice a client fidgeting, restless; they may sense that they are “full” of enough stimulation. A session may be 15 minutes or 45 or 60, but it is not routine. Mr Bowen did not try to “chase the pain” away by doing moves everywhere there was pain. His focus was to get the healing process started, not finish it on the day.

This is our framework for the “why” of no other touch modalities on the day. Whether done at the

beginning or end, other hands-on work gives more messages to the brain. And with Bowen’s work, more is not better. What follows is my personal, descriptive imagining of the influence of specific modalities on our work. It is not scientifically supported, as we have done no studies yet to explore these perspectives. But this article has been affirmed by Ossie and some of our most experienced instructors around the world. Until such time as studies are done, consider this as food for thought.

What about giving a massage with Bowen moves at the end?

Massage stimulates the external nerves on the skin, which elicit a precise, localized brain response. The brain reads that the “outside world” is affecting the body. If it is in any way sore, the body protects and defends, even if the mind thinks this is the right way to relax. Bowen moves at the end may tell the body, “Okay, invasion is over, you can relax now”. But how much better not to have stimulated the defenses before then!

In contrast, when a Bowen move is done correctly, it stimulates the skin only minimally. We avoid slipping on the skin and flooding sensory messages so that we can specify a stretch on the proprioceptors in the fascia, limiting our subtle pressure to the “stretch, roll, release” movement. This message travels through the internal nervous system to the brain. The brain calculates the body’s position in space, and compares the amount of stretch to the “original blueprint” for that area’s resting rate. A re-set message is sent to return the fascia to its normal resting rate, to normalize, whether it was too tight or too loose. This “re-setting” is a natural process that happens all day as we move ourselves through space. Bowen moves emulate this natural process if they feel natural to the body. Even our Bowen moves can feel invasive if done too hard and “unnaturally”. While it is easy

to imagine that a massage done with deep touch will activate the body to protect, this will occur from Bowenwork done roughly, as well.

What about a massage with light touch?

Even if massage is non-invasive, the brain will still process the movements as coming from the outside world through the peripheral nerves. As the massage goes on, the sheer volume of information can become overwhelming to the brain. At some point, the brain stops interpreting the stimulation as relaxing and starts defending. Indeed, for many clients the areas even start to feel numb. When you add Bowen moves at the end, the tissue is already fluid-filled and the brain overloaded. While it is a marvel of Bowenwork that some messages still get through and effect a re-set message, it is like sending a wave through sludge.

What about chiropractic?

When the body is adjusted, the sudden moves on the ligaments can be felt as an invasion, and in some cases, an injury. The body will often defend, tightening the fascia that needs to down-regulate and soften. The tension in the muscles may be relieved at the moment of the adjustment, but commonly the body reacts to the invasion of the ligaments afterwards and protects, putting the client into spasm anew. While some practitioners try to ameliorate the damage by doing Bowen after an adjustment and may have some effect, they are participating in a mixed bag of damage and repair -- not what Mr. Bowen intended! Many D.C.'s have explored Bowenwork alone, and been amazed at the ability of tissues to respond beyond their expectations, and to stabilize the spinal structure more effectively than adjustments.

What about acupuncture?

Some acupuncturists who have learned Bowenwork have explored both mixing and keeping them separate. Many discover that

acupuncture is best separated from Bowenwork by a few days. The energy that is sent through the meridians from acupuncture needles is profound. The energy sent from Bowen moves is profound. Each one sets off an energy wave through a variety of channels. Mr Bowen was careful to avoid creating "chaos", as he put it, through sending too many waves to unwind the body at once. Some L.Ac.'s have said that the Chinese system, done more deeply with bigger needles, overpowers Bowenwork more than the Japanese system, done more shallowly with finer needles.

What about Reiki or other energy work?

If the transmission of energy work is brief enough, such as a few moments at the beginning of a session, it is not likely to disturb the Bowenwork messages from settling in during the session. After all, we hold gentle acupressure points during the Head procedure, including a 30-40 second hold at the end; but it is brief, and then we leave the client alone to process. The problem is that if energy work is done for a longer amount of time, it becomes too obvious. Whether the hands are placed lightly on the skin or held above, the brain is stimulated with awareness of the practitioner. The two energy fields are mixed, which overlays the internal journey that the client would take if the practitioner was out of the room.

What about essential oils or aromatherapy?

Ossie once responded to a practitioner asking about using essential oils during a session, "Well, they were not around in Mr. Bowen's day, so he did not use them. If you were to rub the feet or up and down the spine, that would be too much stimulation, and I would advise against it". With aromatherapy, if you and the client agree to infuse the room with an aroma for healing purposes, then that is likely not to interfere. But if you were to rouse the client in the midst of the session to sniff an aroma from a vial, then you

would interrupt the most valuable part of the session, which is allowing their brain to forget about you.

What about music?

Some practitioners like to use background music in their clinics. Mr Bowen did not use music in his clinic, nor did Ossie and Elaine. Consider that music stimulates both brainwave patterns and emotions. What sounds lovely to one person can be disturbing to another. My facialist was fond of playing the haunting Adagio in G Minor by Albinoni/Giazetti during a facial, which to anyone who saw the film "Gallipoli" brings back slow-motion imagery of tragedy on the battlefield! A professional musician I know abhors new-age music. I have heard clients say the sound of chimes or trickling water is like fingernails on a chalkboard. Many of us feel there is just no need to add another frequency to the harmonic vibrations stimulated by Bowen moves. However, if you ask the client their preference, and they want the music, it may be fine. I simply suggest that you examine whether you are entraining your own brainwave patterns with the music. If so, you might not hear the subtle "body music" going on inside the client, and miss energetic clues the body might give you.

What about teaching the client exercises and stretches from another modality, such as Physical Therapy or yoga?

If you are a professional physio, then teaching the client to do stretching and exercises beyond our training is okayed by Ossie, as long as the work is not done during a session. If a person is trained to give this guidance (truly trained), then it has the potential to be helpful to the client in reversing old patterns.

What about practicing a variety of modalities on a client, but not mixing them within one session?

Ossie and Elaine have been generous in their teaching about this in order to show respect for the wide variety of skills that students bring to the training, more so than Mr. Bowen

might have been. Ossie tells the story of how Mr. Bowen would respond when a client revealed that they had received other bodywork between sessions. He would simply say, "There is the door", and walk out. Not only was there no combining of any other modality within the session, but he would not offer his work if a client alternated it with another modality while he was working with them.

Mr Bowen simply wanted results for the client. The best way he could assess what was needed by the body was to receive clear responses from his work, so he could determine what to do subsequently. He did not expect to know the full picture of the body's response for a minimum of five days. Ossie and Elaine teach, "Wait at least 3 days after the client has

received another form of work to do Bowenwork", so the fluid-filled tissue has a chance to drop swelling and be ready for the Bowen messages. They say, "Do not receive other bodywork for at least 5-7 days after a session", to allow the body the full arc of time to integrate and respond.

Certainly, a variety of modalities may be of benefit to the client. But separate them. Do a few sessions of Bowenwork, and assess the results by taking measurements and pain scales and descriptions at the beginning and end. Then perform your other modality for a period of weeks, and take the same assessments beginning and end. Be a good scientist about it. Get a clear picture of what each modality offers to their system.

Sometimes Mr. Bowen referred clients to other practitioners after

giving it his best, saying, "I'm sorry, I can't help you". But that was after he determined what his work could or could not do by full exploration. It is a myth that Mr Bowen cut everyone loose after a couple of sessions; he worked on many people for months and years when the work served as valuable maintenance for a chronic condition. If we wish to get the most powerful results we can for our clients, then it is our responsibility to fully explore what Bowenwork can do for them by using it alone on the day, and trusting the technique.

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