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The Bowen Technique Bowen and the Born Survivor

by Janie Godfrey with material from Moira Petty and Julian Baker

In April 2007, a feature article by Moira Petty appeared in the Daily Mail about what must be the acid test for the effectiveness of any therapy. The article covers the exploits of adventurer Bear Grylls, probably best known in the UK for his television series *Born Survivor*. From the comfort of our living rooms, many of us have watched him bound into a number of hostile, life-threatening corners of the world and survive on his knowledge and wits alone. As he leaps, hikes, jumps and climbs through, over and around all manner of landscapes – avoiding deadly perils at every turn, he exudes exceptional fitness and health.

It comes as a great surprise to find that Bear has had to deal with significant, severe and mobility-threatening back pain. Chronic back problems have been with him for more than ten years.

When he was 21 and training alongside the SAS (12 years ago), he broke his back after his parachute failed to inflate at 16,000 feet. Typically risk-taking, even in such a situation, he explains: "I should have cut the main parachute and gone to the reserve but thought there was time to resolve the problem." Unfortunately, there wasn't time for Plan B and he landed on his parachute pack, which was like an iron bar, and he fractured three vertebrae.

Incredibly, his spinal cord had not been severed, he wasn't dead and he wasn't paralysed. Even so, he had come very close to severing his spinal cord and the doctor called him a miracle man. He received his treatment at Headley Court, the defence forces' rehab centre in Surrey. Because of his age and fitness, the doctors decided that they could avoid surgery.

The rehabilitation programme he followed was designed to help servicemen get back to active duty, so he was very fortunate, as a civilian, to have access to it. His days consisted of ten hours of physiotherapy, swimming, ultrasound treatment and stretching. Most people in Bear's situation would have undergone surgery to fuse the broken vertebrae. While Bear was grateful not to have had to go down that route, he says: "I had nightmares for months. Still, I was lucky to walk away without surgery - but ever since, I have suffered twinges and pains."

Over the years he had found that deep massage helped with the back pain but nonetheless, he always felt physically 'unbalanced' by his injury. Recently, however, Bear has found an effective treatment for this long-standing problem. Sometime in early 2006, Bear's wife suggested that he try the Bowen Technique. He was sceptical, but wanted to keep an open mind when he went along for his appointment with Sarah Yearsley, a Bowen therapist based in East Sussex.

He was amazed that, after the gentle and light Bowen moves "it felt like petrol was being put back in my tank and I could feel all the stress seeping away".

His feeling of being 'unbalanced' was also dealt with. After his accident, his spine and pelvis had lost their alignment and Sarah noted that Bear's pelvis was slightly twisted, which would easily cause ongoing problems and backache. Even a subtle misalignment can have a disproportionate impact on health, flexibility and balance. For someone like Bear, who puts his body through the most extreme demands, this alignment is very important.

Bowen author and instructor Julian Baker explains how such a gentle, soft tissue therapy like Bowen can have such an impact on skeletal balance:

"The skeleton is often mistakenly thought of as some kind of 'rigid' structure, whereas this is not the case. The skeleton is simply a collection of individual bones held together by the 'bag' that is the soft tissue."

If the muscles and soft tissue are in even balance, the bones will be held in balance as well.

Julian goes on to say: "Bowen works on the whole system but also releases areas of energetic tension, and whether the problem is 'mechanical' or otherwise is not relevant. In fact we could end up questioning whether mechanical problems actually exist by themselves, without any kind of imbalance in the soft tissue! To this end Bowen can and has been used in situations such as prolapsed discs, subluxations, pelvic torsions etc., etc."

Bear describes himself as 'hooked' on Bowen now and has treatment every month, saying: "Sarah's a star! And has helped keep my body together despite a continual bashing up mountains and in jungles filming a new Channel 4 Survival Series- I am a convert!"

Bowen helped him prepare for arguably his most perilous undertaking yet. At the age of 23 in 1998, Bear became the youngest British climber to scale Mount Everest, and on 14th May 2007, he achieved a feat that had been deemed impossible by many critics prior to the mission: he flew a powered paraglider over Everest's 29,035ft summit. Truly, a born survivor!

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