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Girl in a coma

Jessica Willard was not expected to last the night after she fell from a wall. Yet, not only did she recover, but she is now back to full health—and she suspects a therapy called Bowen had a lot to do with it

Juliet and Derek Willard took the phone call one night that every parent dreads. Their daughter Jessica was dying in a hospital in Portugal, and they were urged to fly out immediately to say their final goodbyes. Jessica, who was 23 at the time, was in an induced coma in intensive care after a bad fall and wasn't expected to survive the night.

Jessica had gone on holiday with a group of friends to Faro in August 2012. "We had dinner and I remember going to a nightclub and dancing with my boyfriend," said Jessica, now 25. That was Jessica's last memory until she woke up in a hospital in Oxford two weeks later.

Her friends told her that, after leaving the nightclub, she had fallen five metres (16 feet) from a wall in an area that was unlit. She landed on her head and suffered a fractured skull and a broken back, and both her shoulders were dislocated.

At the hospital, doctors also discovered two haematomas (blood clots) in her brain. They immediately induced a coma and believed Jessica wouldn't survive the night. By the time Jessica's parents arrived, the doctors had a slightly more optimistic prognosis after relieving some of the pressure on the brain. "One of the nurses told my mother that it was still possible I would die," said Jessica.

Juliet and Derek were joined by the parents of Jessica's friends who were on holiday with her, including Jen Webster, whose holiday home the group had been staying in. "It was very difficult for everyone," said Jen. "I just wanted to offer some kind of comfort to them, and so I said that I was a Bowen therapist and I'd be happy to

work on Jessica if she pulled through."

Bowen is a form of gentle touch therapy developed by Australian Tom Bowen from the 1960s until his death in 1982. It stimulates the body's own healing system through a series of rolling movements that the therapist makes with his fingers and thumbs.

Neither parent had a clue what Bowen was, but "it was probably a case that something was better than nothing," said Jen. "I think they were also reassured by the fact I had worked as a registered nurse in an operating theatre for 15 years." But at that point, said Jessica, "nobody was offering much hope, so there didn't seem to be anything to lose".

Although Jessica was out of immediate danger, she developed pneumonia while in the intensive care unit, and was moved to the neurological ward. Two weeks later, she was on a jet back to the UK and the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford. "I was told later that I was flown back in a jet because it could fly lower and there wouldn't be so much pressure on my brain," said Jessica.

Reconnecting body and brain

The doctors at John Radcliffe were also happy for Jen to treat Jessica, although she suspects that they, too, had no idea what Bowen therapy was. Jen was taken aback when she saw Jessica for the first time. "She was a tiny creature, hardly able to speak," she recalled.

"I had lost two stone in just two weeks," Jessica explained. "I had no energy and I was confined to a wheelchair. I had lost all sense of taste and smell, and the doctors were not confident I would ever get those back. I had also lost my voice and could speak only in a whisper. I had short-term memory problems, and

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About Bowen

Tom Bowen developed his therapy while treating the injuries, aches and pains of local sportsmen, friends and family in the Geelong region of Australia where he lived. Through trial and error and a fair degree of intuition, he perfected the simple moves and 'rolls' that the Bowen therapist makes with his hands and thumbs on muscles, tendons, ligaments and soft tissue.

According to the Bowen Therapy Professional Association, the rolling movements reawaken the body's natural healing processes, stimulating it to realign and address imbalances in function, so restoring the body's homeostasis, or physiological equilibrium.

Shortly before Tom's death in 1982, the Australian government's report into alternative medicine estimated that he had treated more than 13,000 patients with a high level of success. The Bowen Technique is today taught to final-year students of osteopathy in Australia.

A typical Bowen session lasts between 30 minutes and an hour. Acute, short-term problems can usually be resolved within one to three sessions, although chronic conditions may take longer, depending on the patient and extent of the problem.

For more information see www.bowen-technique.co.uk

I also had poor visual memory and couldn't remember who I'd seen."

Despite this menu of problems, Jen said her first aim was to help Jessica relax and to ease the pain she was feeling. "In traumatic cases like this, I also wanted to help reconnect the brain and the body. With Bowen, it's about sending healing signals, or reminders, to the brain so that the healing process can begin."

Within a short time, Jen started to work on Jessica's vocal chords. "They felt stronger the

The rolling movements a Bowen therapist makes reawaken the body's natural healing processes, stimulating it to realign

next day, and my voice was immediately a little louder," said Jessica. Although she enjoyed the treatment when it was happening, she said she often felt worse the next day. Jen says this is typical after a Bowen session as the body readjusts to its natural state. "It's a sign that the healing process is working. It's a little like a speeded-up gym session. It's very deep and subtle, and it triggers changes that are sustainable," Jen explained.

After two weeks, Jessica was moved to the Royal Berkshire Hospital closer to her home in Twyford, near Reading, where she stayed for a further six weeks. Jen continued to visit her every week. "When I was in the hospital, my back kept playing up, and I was unable to lift things. I remember trying to get up to make a cup of tea, and I just got stuck and couldn't move."

Getting back to normal

Despite these setbacks, Jen continued to see improvements in Jessica. "There was a long period when her body was responding all the time," Jen said. "She was putting on weight and her balance was coming back."

Six weeks later she was allowed home—a remarkable turnaround from a catastrophic accident that had happened just 10 weeks earlier. Jen continued her weekly visits while Jessica's rehabilitation also progressed, and included outpatient physiotherapy sessions at the hospital. The pain came and went; "I was still getting aches and pains, and my hip and back were hurting."

A year after she returned home, she went back to work full-time at the human resources department of Toys R Us. "If you met her, you'd never guess she had suffered a traumatic accident that almost killed her," says Jen. Jessica's sense of smell and taste hasn't fully returned, but it's getting there, and her vision and memory are almost back to normal. She can now move around without pain and her balance has been restored.

She still has occasional 'top-up' sessions with Jen at the clinic in Thame, Oxfordshire, but other than that and the quarterly visits to hospital, she now leads a normal healthy life.

But here's the \$64,000 question: would Jessica have improved so dramatically if she hadn't had regular Bowen therapy sessions? Nobody can be sure, although





Meet the therapist

Jennifer Webster first heard about Bowen therapy in 1992 when she was a state-registered nurse working as a theatre sister in operating rooms at the Portland and Wellington Hospitals. "It sounded interesting, but I didn't do anything with the information until I came across some practitioners at an exhibition," she said. This rekindled her interest in the therapy and she qualified as a Bowen therapist a year later, in 2008.

She still works part-time as a theatre nurse, but her first love is now Bowen and running her practice in Thame, a small town in Oxfordshire. "I love nursing and theatre work, but am also convinced that there is a place for alternative therapies in relieving symptoms and aiding recovery. With the Bowen Technique, I have found a therapy which meets—and exceeds—those criteria. Sometimes medical intervention is necessary and unavoidable, but even then, Bowen's holistic and remedial benefits can work hand in hand with medical treatment, dramatically reducing pain and speeding recuperation."

Jen can be contacted by phone on 07768188664, or check out her website: www.jenwebsterbowen.com.

Jen and Jessica have a pretty good idea. Jessica's parents are certainly convinced and both are now regular clients of Jen's.

Juliet said: "What a change took place. From Jessica being in a somewhat helpless, childlike state, with no voice and very ill, she is now able to travel on her own and shows no outward signs of the horrendous accident that happened to her."

Even the doctors at the John Radcliffe were astonished by Jessica's recovery when she paid them a visit a few months later. "I know that every case is different, but they weren't at all hopeful. They certainly never believed I would get my sense of taste and smell back."

Jen is less surprised. "Jessica's is just one of many remarkable stories I've encountered as a Bowen therapist," she says.