New research suggests Americans are in a lot of pain.

More than half of adults – 126 million, or 55.7 percent – experienced some type of physical pain in the past three months, according to a new analysis by the National Institutes of Health. Approximately 25.3 million adults, or 11.2 percent, experienced pain every day.

“Pain affects daily life and function due to the decreased mobility, but it also affects the human spirit,” says Dr. JoAnna Barclay, pain management physician at the Pain Treatment Center at Advocate Sherman Hospital in Elgin, Ill. “It’s important to voice one’s pain and seek help.”

The findings, published in The Journal of Pain, also found that nearly 40 million adults, or 17.6 percent, experienced severe levels of pain. People suffering from severe pain were more likely to have worse health status, use more health care services and suffer from more disability.

Women, older people, and non-Hispanics were more likely to report pain.

“Adapting family life, work and relationships to the realities of untreated chronic pain could be very frustrating and disappointing,” says Dr. Sebastian Guman, anesthesiologist at the Pain Treatment Center. “Chronic pain is associated with anxiety, depression and impairment in functional abilities. It can also impair the performance of activities of daily living, deteriorating the patient’s quality of life in a major way.”

Besides making an appointment with a physician, Dr. Barclay says those in pain need to make it a priority to exercise, eat healthy and continue living an active and social life.

Dr. Guman stresses the importance of communicating pain as soon as possible.

“It is of fundamental importance that the patients communicate their pain in a timely fashion because when pain is properly treated early, many people can recover and resume their lives,” he says. “Left untreated, pain can result in nerve damage that never heals.”

Dear God,
My body is precious but sometimes it feels like it’s fighting against me. Help me to find support and treatment so that I can be all that I’ve been created to be.

Music Helps Manage Pain

Regardless of our religious tradition, music plays some part of how we express our faith. Congregational singing, chanting, a cantor singing the liturgy, a choir, a praise band, recitation of sacred scriptures, a piano playing underneath a prayer. There are so many ways that music forms the heart of religious practice.

Creating music together or even just experiencing familiar and expressive music helps lift our spirits and also affects our bodies. Many research studies show that music helps reduce blood pressure, heart rate and the amount of cortisol (a powerful stress hormone) that gets released into our body. Music has also been shown to help manage pain—both the acute pain that can come from an injury, but also chronic pain that lasts over time. Many people report that singing helps them manage depression and anxiety.

How does it work? One theory is that music that is familiar and enjoyable to us triggers the natural opioids in our body. Our body emits its own form of morphine that actually reduces the experience of discomfort. Music may also just help take our minds off of our aches and help us focus on something outside of ourselves.

Regardless, music is powerful medicine...and it’s one of the strengths that we have as faith communities to promote health and well-being. How can we apply our musical traditions so that they are not just part of our ritual or worship practices, but so that they are an integral part of our outreach to those who are sick or frail? Some faith traditions offer the laying on of hands for healing. Could music be added to enhance the impact of the experience? Could we invite the congregation to feel the music in their bodies as they sing together or listen to the priest chanting, imam reciting or the organ playing?

There are many things that faith communities do to support health and well-being. Sometimes they are so obvious that we miss them. Look for ways that your house of worship can connect your musical traditions to promote healing for your members and others in the community.


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