

# Programs and Therapies Explore Ways to Manage Pain



Deborah Sferlazza, 60, a former school principal, lives with chronic pain — but she’s learned ways to put her pain “in the back seat. It (the pain) is not always invited to the party,” she said.

After three surgeries to fix her discs, the pain remained. Her medications take some of the edge off, but she is unable to work and went on disability.

“I was treating myself like a china doll, worrying that anything I might do would break me,” she said. She stopped socializing.

In August 2015, she mentioned to her physical therapist at Beaumont Hospital, Troy, that she was depressed and wanted to speak with someone.

The therapist recommended a pain management group led by Dr. Bruce Hillenberg, a clinical health psychologist with Beaumont Health System.

“Dr. Hillenberg follows a mindfulness program,” she said. “It helps me stay focused, live in the present moment and how to enjoy what I have. I feel I have a good team around me,” she said.

“In the field of pain care, we take a holistic approach, not only treat pain severity — we focus on how much pain interferes with joy in life and interferes with daily activities,” Hillenberg said.

He explained that acute pain lasts a couple days or weeks and is related to “what we did,” usually the result of temporary damage.

## Pain changes brain function

“Chronic pain lasts more than three months,” Hillenberg said. “The pain system in your spinal cord begins to change. The pain people feel is independent of the individual injury.”

Once the brain system becomes sensitized, stress, worry, lack of sleep, poor diet and lack of movement make the pain worse, he said. Those in chronic pain lose confidence in the ability to move and miss out on participating in activities.

After the injury has healed, people continue to have pain.

“Chronic pain is an illness in itself,” he said.

Hillenberg said treatment can include medication, surgery, and physical or occupational therapy so patients can exercise, gain more confidence in movement, perform daily activities, manage stress and not worry so much.

He said that acupuncture, massage therapy and meditation also help to manage stress so patients can “not just rely on doctors but learn to take care of themselves and take responsibility for managing their condition as much as they can.”

He noted that with the current opioid crisis, it’s important for patients to be better educated about pain management and be more willing to take care of themselves, manage stress, get adequate sleep and learn how to exercise — which could be Pilates, yoga or swimming. He said research indicates that yoga and tai chi are very effective in helping to manage chronic neck pain. Hillenberg said that

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these things make it less likely for a patient to overuse pain medicines.

“Research states that this results in a better quality of life,” he said. “They are in better physical shape and socialize more.”

In the U.S., up to 20 percent of children, 35 percent of adults, 60 percent of older adults and 80 percent of people over the age of 80 suffer from chronic pain.

Hillenberg said that chronic pain is the most prevalent and costly medical condition to treat in the U.S., surpassing heart disease, cancer and diabetes.

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*Terry Oparka writes for the Troy Times. Her article, titled “Programs and Therapies Explore Ways to Manage Pain” was originally published on [www.candgnews.com](http://www.candgnews.com)*

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