

Baylor Researchers Publish Largest Study Ever Conducted on the Use of Massage Therapists

Many people receive massage therapy and for many reasons. But, according to a new study, the largest and most comprehensive ever conducted on the subject, the prevalence of visits to massage therapists is higher than one might have imagined and the reasons may be surprising.

Using data from over 27,000 people surveyed as part of the 2022 round of the annual National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), researchers at Baylor University found that one in nine adult Americans visited a massage therapist in 2021. That adds up to nearly 30 million people.

The investigators, Dr. Jeff Levin, University Professor of Epidemiology and Population Health, and Dr. Matt Bradshaw, Research Professor of Sociology, analyzed data from the NHIS, which is based on a representative sample of the U.S. population and has been conducted annually by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention since 1957. About every ten years, the NHIS has collected utilization data on massage therapy. The Baylor study, published in the peer-reviewed *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*, found that 11.1% of U.S. adults visited a massage therapist in 2021, for any reason; 6.0% did so to help with pain; and 8.5% for overall health.

Levin and Bradshaw also addressed who seeks massage therapy and why. Their study looked at about 30 sociodemographic, health services, physical and mental health and well-being, and behavioral variables. The highest rates of visiting a massage therapist were found among socioeconomically advantaged people; among those who seek out complementary and integrative health practitioners, including chiropractors, acupuncturists, and naturopaths; and among those who meditate or practice yoga or guided imagery. Rates were also higher among

those who consider their health as excellent and who are very satisfied with their life. Indicators of physical and mental health and functional status matter, but were less predictive.

According to the study, “These data points essentially tell us who it is that seeks massage, and ... the answer does not appear to be primarily sick or functionally disabled people on medical referral.” People often seek massage for reasons other than addressing physical challenges. Regular massage may be used “as part of a wellness-seeking lifestyle or due to interest in mind-body healing. Receiving regular massage may be viewed by some clients more as a self-actualization or even spiritual pursuit.”

For Levin, who has been receiving regular massage for about 35 years, this is encouraging news. “What our study shows,” he explained, “is that it’s probably not helpful any longer to label massage as an ‘alternative’ therapy, with all of the marginality that the term conveys. Licensed massage therapists ought to be respected as mainstream practitioners, whose profession provides a therapeutic approach not just to address pain and functional challenges but to foster wellness and overall well-being, physical and emotional. Every one of us can benefit from working with a skilled massage therapist. They’re the hidden gems in the healthcare system.”

Levin and Bradshaw are affiliated with Baylor’s Institute for Studies of Religion, where Levin is director of its Program on Religion and Population Health. He also serves as Professor of Medical Humanities at Baylor, and as Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Duke University School of Medicine.

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