

Hypnosis & Phantom Limb Pain

Perhaps the worst thing you can say to someone with phantom limb pain is “It’s all in your mind” and yet, everything that you experience is a combination of the interaction between your mind and your body. Let me give you some examples.

When you get hot, messages are transmitted to your brain, which releases a message back to your body to make you sweat and cool you down. When you eat a meal, messages go to your brain and it instructs your body to send the relevant enzymes to your stomach etc, to break down your food. Your body constantly sends messages to your brain and messages are sent back to your body giving further instructions.

This is true of pain as well. Messages are sent from your body to your brain telling it that something is wrong. How then does this explain phantom limb pain when the limb is no longer there?

When you have an amputation, a surgeon removes the limb, but as far as some parts of your brain are concerned, the limb is still there. These parts of your brain are the ones laid down before you were born and contain your body image/memory and your motor skills (ability to move your limbs).

According to the latest research, phantom limb pain involves these two areas. One type of phantom limb pain is shooting pains that may go up, or down your phantom limb and stump. These pains are thought to result from lack of feedback from your phantom toes, or fingers. You see your body feeds back information all the time. If you hold an egg in your hand, there is a point when, if you carry on squeezing, it will crack. Before that point, your fingers acknowledge the pressure, a message goes to the brain with this information and back comes the instruction to stop squeezing.

If this information is not fed back, the hand will carry on making a tight fist. Many upper limb patients experience their phantom hand in a tight fist. If this sensory information is not being sent to the brain, messages flow through the nerves to the phantom asking for feedback and movement. These messages are experienced as shooting pains. Most patient’s with phantom limb pain are unable to move their phantom toes/fingers and so are not able to provide this feedback and movement, and so the shooting pains continue.

The second type of phantom limb pain is concerned with body image/memory. Often these pains are similar to those experienced prior to surgery. Patients with diabetes may experience pain under their feet as though a red-hot poker was being pushed into their foot. Patients with vascular problems may experience a tight crushing feeling as though their foot is caught in a vice. Our brain remembers the pain, unless it is updated by new information.

If you burn your thumb for instance, taking food out of the oven, it stings. You put it under the cold tap and it stops stinging and goes numb. You have updated your body memory. As your thumb warms up again, the stinging comes back so you put it back under the tap for longer. We are constantly updating our body memory throughout the day. Unfortunately, because your phantom limb is not there any more you cannot update the information by feeling it and this is where the hypnosis is of benefit.

There are two ways to get information to these areas of the brain. One is by feeling it and one is by vision. Hypnosis uses visualisation to get this information to these areas. Under hypnosis if you change what you see, you change what you feel.

What is hypnosis?

It is an altered state where your body is relaxed and your mind is focussed. We experience a natural hypnotic state at different times throughout the day, e.g. when watching a film, reading a book, in fact, any time when your mind wanders away from the reality you are in. Whilst in this relaxed state a hypnotherapist can treat you by working with your unconscious mind to assist you with a variety of issues.

Hypnosis is now used a lot in sports to help athletes to focus and concentrate under intense pressure.

How does it work for phantom pain?

Hypnosis is used to visualise the pain leaving your body. The visualisation continues by exercising your phantom limb, toes, ankle, knee or, fingers, wrist, elbow. This does two things, it gives feedback to the motor part of your brain and it updated your body memory (like the burnt thumb).

The answer to phantom limb pain often lies in the movement. Your phantom limb will get rid of its own pain if it is able to move. Hypnosis uses the same method we use each day when we have pain. If you get cramp in a limb you rub it, move it, warm it, cool it. Under hypnosis, the phantom limb is treated as if it is still there because, as far as two areas of your brain are concerned, it is.

Does it work?

Questionnaires are sent out to patients 6 months after their hypnosis to monitor their pain relief over that period. Results show:

All pain gone	48%
More than 50% gone	32%
More than 25% gone	16%
No change	4%

Clinically trained NHS hypnotherapists are now being trained to do this work.

MediPro Relax Liner

A significant number of amputees suffer from phantom limb pain, which can interfere considerably with daily activities. Most of the time this is described as a sudden sharp pain in the limb that is no longer present. Orthodox medicine often prefers to treat the pain with pain killers (opiates) which can have considerable side effects- at the same time, this approach cannot guarantee a long term or permanent remedy for the majority of cases. There are alternative approaches to treatment, for example acupuncture or magnetic field therapy however these also, do not necessarily provide a lasting remedy for this type of pain.

The innovative MediPro Relax liner and night sock was created within a framework of an intensive research and development programme, achieving a lasting remedy against phantom limb pain without side effects due to the integral properties of Umbrellan and its elastic-metallurgic properties.

Following amputation nerve endings have suffered physical trauma and there is both a change in the pattern of impulses transmitted to the brain and an absence of impulses from the amputated body part. These disrupted nerve endings are also exposed to external influences which prior to amputation they were protected against namely electrical and magnetic stimulation, recent theory links these external influences to the sensation of phantom limb pain as experienced by many amputees. These external stimulants are prevalent throughout the world, and can either be man made such as mobile communication systems, power transmission and radio/television waves or inherently present due to atmospheric or weather change as well as the influence of the earth's own magnetic field. Due to the nature of the nervous system, these external stimulants can be readily absorbed and transported within the body resulting in negative pain responses.

The Relax range of liners for both Trans Femoral and Trans Tibial amputees provide effective shielding from these influences through the unique properties of the Umbrellan material encapsulated within the optimum silicone formulation of the liner. Therefore protection is provided in a silicone liner, a common concept in prosthetic fittings. The night sock provides the same protection in a lightweight fabric only version for minimum night time disruption and maximum comfort. The night sock may also be used as a quick assessment tool of this treatment's effectiveness as it comes with a money back guarantee. Evaluation to date of Umbrellan has shown that its effectiveness against symptoms can be noticeable within a short period of time not exceeding 48 hours.

Phantom pain affects a large percentage of amputees but should not be confused with other ambiguous pain symptoms. MediPro publish guidelines on suitability for this treatment type and also advise that consultation with your limb centre doctor is advisable when dealing with phantom limb pain.

Initial patient trials have provided excellent results and further study data is set to be published in recognised clinical journals shortly.