

HYPNOSIS AND 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 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, the limb is removed by a surgeon and, 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 pains are 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 feedback 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 message flow through the nerves to the phantom asking for feedback and movement. These messages are experienced as shooting pains.

Most of the 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 many 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 to update your body memory. As your thumb warms up again, the stinging comes back so you put it back under the tap for longer. You are constantly updating your body memory throughout the day.

Unfortunately, because your phantom limb is not there, any move you can update the information by touch and this is where the hypnosis is of benefit.

There are two ways to get information to these areas of the brain affected.

One is by touch 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 a 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 for a variety of issues by working with your unconscious mind to assist you.

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 out of 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 updates your body memory (like the burnt thumb).

The answer to phantom limb pain often lies in 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.

How long does the hypnosis treatment take?

It usually takes four sessions. You are given a CD to use after the 1st session and at the 4th session you have a personalised CD with your hypnosis session on specifically for your pains. You are advised to use the CD 3 times a day until you have been pain free for 4 weeks, and are off your pain medicine.

Does it work?

Questionnaires are sent out to patients 6 months after their hypnosis in order to monitor their pain relief over time.

Results show:

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

References:

Bamford C. (2006). A multi faceted approach to the treatment of phantom limb pain using hypnosis: Contemporary Hypnosis 23(3).

Please ask your treating clinician for details.