

Are you pinned down by chronic pain? About 15 to 20 per cent of the population here are thought to have the problem. But pain management programmes can help by challenging how you view and react to your suffering. **Shefali Srinivas** finds out more.

Even after the amputation of a limb, an amputee continues to experience sensations of pain or numbness from it. People have described it as a burning, aching and even excruciating pain, as if someone were hammering the invisible foot. Because of its mysterious nature, it was ascribed to paranormal activity and hence named "phantom limb pain".

Medical science has developed many theories to explain the phenomenon, but it has yet to be fully understood.

One theory suggests that when the damaged nerve endings in the stump regrow, they send abnormal signals to the brain, causing chronic pain.

Pain is the oldest medical problem known to man, but the study of it and the way the brain perceives it evolved into a medical speciality only in the last decade.

Medical science has long ignored the emotional component of pain, says Dr Bernard Lee, the director of the chronic and interventional pain management service at Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH).

"Pain is not a straight line. Research shows that it is plastic, it can expand. The memory of pain stays on, even when the thing that caused it has healed," he points out.

The concept of "pain memory" may be a hard one to grasp, but it is yielding new therapies in the field of pain



STEVEN LEE

Mrs Teo still experiences pain, but she now has the tools to deal with it emotionally.

management. Simply put, it means that all pain we experience is both in the body as well as the mind. This is a relatively new field in Singapore, but doctors say there is an increasing demand for it.

Dr Lee estimates that 15 to 20 per

cent of the population here suffer from chronic pain.

This is defined as pain that continues a month or more beyond the usual recovery period for an injury or illness. It can go on for months or years and can interfere with daily life at all levels.