

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I'm embarrassed to admit that I have this problem. I can't seem to stop pulling my hair out. I have a bald spot on the top of my head that I hide by combing my hair over it, or wearing a ball cap (which, obviously, I can't do at work or in most other situations). I would be humiliated if my friends knew, and I'm constantly making sure that no one can see my bald spot. I feel crazy and weak because I can't stop. Have you ever heard of this?

-- Beverly

Dear Beverly,

You are not alone. You describe an impulse control behavior called trichotillomania, and research suggests that about eleven million Americans suffer the same urge to pluck their hair out. Like you, many people pull hair from their scalp, but others pick at their eyebrows, eyelashes, beards (if they've got one) or other parts of their body, resulting in noticeable bald patches. It's sometimes classified as a habit, an addiction, or a tic disorder, and is related to nail biting or skin picking. Most sufferers go to great lengths to keep the problem hidden from friends and family, and feel ashamed of this compulsion. But, this is a problem that you can overcome, and remember that it doesn't reflect a lack of self-discipline or weakness.

Trichotillomania has been observed since the time of Hippocrates, but the problem has been virtually ignored by psychologists and the medical community until the last fifteen years or so. In fact, it wasn't even officially labeled as a disorder until 1987.

In general, the onset is during the pre-teen or teen years (typically around age 12). It is seen more often in women (about 90%) but it is not clear whether women are just more likely to seek treatment for this problem. Some theories suggest that genetics may play a part in trichotillomania (as in Tourette's Syndrome). It is also clear that stress makes the problem worse.

The good news is that there is treatment, and hope for recovery. During mild episodes, concentration and awareness may be enough to stop hair pulling. One client of mine was able to stop completely by wearing gloves whenever she could for about two weeks. That seemed to be enough to stop the habit, and then she was able to go on with a hair-pulling free (and gloveless) life.

Psychologists and therapists can help with a cognitive-behavioral intervention that will allow you to better understand the triggers that lead to your hair pulling. When asked to analyze when this behavior occurs, most people can identify certain times of day, emotional states, or situations where the behavior is most likely to occur. Keeping a journal of your behavior can help with this awareness. Serotonin-reuptake-inhibitors (like Prozac) may also help. There is some anecdotal evidence that alternative therapies such as acupuncture, biofeedback, dietary changes, and exercise may help some people.

Stop suffering in silence, and get some help. Talk with your doctor or set up an appointment with a therapist. You may find that there are support groups in your area

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7/16/03

and there are virtual support groups on the Internet. Come out of the closet. This is nothing to be ashamed of.

A good source of information about this disorder can be found on the Internet at www.trich.org (The Trichotillomania Learning Center). An excellent new book called *The Hair-Pulling Problem: A Complete Guide to Trichotillomania* by Fred Penzel, Ph.D. was published in 2003 by the Oxford University Press. Check these out. You'll discover that you can solve this problem.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.