



HEALING FROM TRICHOTILLOMANIA AND OTHER BODY-FOCUSED REPETITIVE BEHAVIORS A POSITIVE APPROACH

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Julia was worn out after a long day at work. She came home, lay down on the couch, and turned on the TV. After a few minutes, her fingers were rummaging through her long brown hair, feeling their way through the strands, mindlessly searching for split ends and then for hairs that felt thick to the touch. One, then two hairs came out, and before she knew it, she couldn't stop. The urge to pull was overwhelming. A handful of hair piled up on the floor beside her. With each hair she pulled out, Julia swore it would be the last, only to find her self gripped over and over again by the urge to pull just one more, and one more, and one more.

This scene was so customary for Julia that the ensuing depression and anxiety was immediate and complete. Every morning she promised herself that this new day would be a clear, pull-free day. And then her hand would go to her head automatically. Her hair pulling seemed to have a mind of its own. She held out for as long as she could, but there were so many triggers that would set her off, and her disappointment quickly turned to self-loathing and hopelessness.

For those who suffer from trichotillomania this scenario is all too familiar. The strong desire to stop pulling is repeatedly surpassed by the habitual pattern of giving in to powerful urges to pull — however against one's will. The worst part for many, even worse than the embarrassing bald spots that may result over time, is the discouraging feeling of being out of control and the shame associated with having this chronic problem. The serious blow to one's self-esteem compounds one's inability to overcome the problem, and often the sufferer gives up trying.

Understanding the Problem

Living with chronic problems like hair pulling and skin picking can be deeply discouraging and set the stage for self-defeating behaviors. Everyone who has gone through the process of trying to change a behavior can relate to the experience of feeling like a failure. With trich, the powerful intensity of the urges makes the experience of failure inevitable. People who struggle with body-focused repetitive disorders have to deal with the intensity of the urges as well as the intensity of the disappointment at not being able to control them. This is often called the failure syndrome, because syndromes are so difficult to overcome. They require a corrective process. In my experience, recovering from body-focused disorders is a continual process of rewarding efforts to resist engaging in the unwanted behavior in order to maintain the motivation to stay on track with one's goals.

Treatment Goals

A major goal of treatment for a chronic problem such as trichotillomania or compulsive skin picking is for people to work very hard at their expectations of what constitutes success and failure. While working toward reducing the problem, the sufferer must keep in mind a small checklist of corrective thinking:

1. Am I paying attention? This is the most important question, because by the nature of paying attention we are establishing a constructive way of dealing with the problem instead of entering a state of denial.
2. What am I going to do about this? Instead of throwing up one's hands in frustration after a slip or a major pulling episode, we ask ourselves, what kind of goals are reasonable right now?

3. In what ways can I find some reinforcement for not engaging in the undesired behavior? What kinds of rewards can I come up with for setting up and following through with my goals? How can I establish rewards that will make it worth the effort?
4. Rather than let irrelevant (self-defeating) thoughts get in the way, continually ask, “Is this going to further my progress or not?”

Effective Strategies for Coping With the Urges

How does one accomplish his or her recovery goals? First, no behavioral procedure can be effective without mindfulness. We cannot change what we are not aware of. Everyone has his or her own best means of increasing awareness of the problem, but the commitment to do things to increase one’s awareness of the problem is paramount. It isn’t easy because when engaged in the behavior people have a tendency to tune out. They don’t want to think about it, and may even go into a trance-like state or not be aware they are pulling until it is too late. So beginning the recovery process involves committing to strategies to increase mindfulness, including recording in daily calendars, logging feelings, noting triggers and high-risk situations, and utilizing barrier methods such as Band-Aids and gloves to interrupt the behavior and help oneself stay conscious before beginning to engage in the undesired behavior.

In my practice, essential strategies for coping with urges and stopping them from translating into pulling or picking include: measures for reducing tactile pleasure; a technique that I call Time Interval Training; Habit Reversal Training; relaxation and breathing; relapse prevention; and self-care.

I tell people, “Every technique is dependent upon the motivation you apply to it.” The question becomes, how can you increase your motivation to give up something that feels so good? The simplest answer is to decrease the pleasure or satisfaction you get from engaging in the behavior, sort of like switching to a low-tar cigarette. Anything you can do to reduce the tactile sensation from touching the hair is going to reduce the pleasure you get from it. So if you are prepared to tolerate the reduced sensations, you are halfway there.

Once you have made the decision to interrupt the pleasure you receive from pulling and tolerate the discomfort of resisting the urges — *if* you do this well before you get into the times that are high risk for you — then you are much more likely to succeed. In other words, if you put Band-Aids on your thumb and index fingers in the morning, or put on cotton gloves as soon as you come home; if you do relaxation techniques regularly so they become an easily accessed tool, you will increase your awareness of high-risk times and be better prepared to battle the urges when they arise.

Often, people don’t realize that the problem is so powerful that you have to wake yourself up. Wearing a barrier like a Band-Aid goes a long way toward interrupting the chain of events that automatically lead to pulling. The goal is to not let your fingers even begin to touch your head and in this way reduce the playing with the hair that leads to increased sensations in your scalp and increasing urges. You want to nip this process in the bud.

It is important to remember we are aiming for progress, not perfection. So even if it doesn’t work all of the time (and most likely it won’t) some of the time is better than nothing. With consistent effort, the periods of being able to resist the urges will happen more frequently.

Naturally, it’s going to be uncomfortable at times. So an important ingredient of beginning treatment is deciding how long you can reasonably tolerate and endure frustration. Maybe it’s a minute to start, or 10 or 15 minutes. What is the minimum amount of time you can go without pulling and feel good about yourself? You may not be able to do it all of the time, but if you establish an attainable goal you will feel better.

This is what I call Time Interval Training. Most people, I find, can start with a 15 or 20- minute daily goal of pull-free time. Many people say, “Oh that’s easy, I can triple that.” And I say, great, go for it. But distinguish between your official 20 minutes of pull-free time or more; and if you want to go longer that’s fine. Once having established a good time interval to start with, the objective becomes, each week, to meet or exceed the time interval that has worked for you the week before, gradually working toward your desired outcome. Most people will be motivated and capable of meeting, if not exceeding, their goal at least some of the time. Over time, with continued effort, Time Interval Training helps condition your “muscle” to resist urges. It builds confidence in your ability to have success with this difficult problem. In essence, it reverses the failure syndrome.

Start with a doable amount of time. Devise a system of accounting: set an alarm, write down how you do each day, work with a therapist and self-report your daily progress. Children can do well with this method by working together with a parent or therapist. Gradually aim for increasing your pull-free time block to a half hour, then an hour, then twice a day for an hour in the morning and evening, and so on. In this way, you can condition yourself to resist urges and build confidence in your ability to get back on track after a slip.

Setting Attainable Goals and Rewarding Progress

The most important element is establishing attainable goals and rewarding your progress. By this I mean, reward *all* of your efforts, not just your success. I cannot emphasize this enough, because inevitably there will be slips and setbacks. But if you have four good days and one difficult day, if you feel great about your progress rather than focusing on your faults, it will be much easier to pick yourself up and start again. So set up a schedule of rewards for yourself, and be sure to pat yourself on your back for all your efforts.

Think of slips as learning opportunities. Plan for them. Be aware of high-risk situations and arm against them with your tools. Then give yourself consistent, ongoing support. Become your own personal coach.

The first step, in case of a lapse, is to get back to accountability. If you are not keeping records, you have no way to chart your progress or get back to goal. This is where working with a therapist or support system comes in. It's a great way to build accountability into the process.

Record keeping goes hand in hand with doing your detective work to increase awareness of triggers and high-risk situations. You can work on interrupting the behavior chain by applying a competing response, such as making a fist, clasping your hands together, sitting on your hands, playing with rubber bands or hand toys. These are the basic components of Habit Reversal Training and they come in handy when you are trying to resist urges. Coupled with relaxation techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, when you are feeling strong urges and throughout the day, you can aim to stay calm and increase your ability to respond to impulses and urges in positive, supportive ways.

Relaxation and breathing techniques can assist you in tolerating the discomfort of resisting urges. These techniques can help improve your ability to manage the uncomfortable feelings that may trigger or follow urges. Everyone has to deal with uncomfortable feelings in life but it is all the more difficult when giving up the temporary release that the pulling has provided in the past.

As we know, this is a syndrome, and the behavior doesn't go away, it comes and goes. Therefore it's essential to perform periodic cognitive fire drills. The time when you might not think you need the program is when you will need it. The trick is to know when to use strategies in preparation for and prevention of full-blown relapses. You can think of a slip as pulling over to the side of the road for a while and then get back on the pull-free highway where you got off. You still have had the experience of not pulling for two minutes, two hours, two days, two weeks, two months, or two years.

The stages of relapse prevention will help you in managing slips and staying on track:

1. Contemplate and prepare to make a desired change.
2. Initiate strategies to change behavior, such as record keeping, Band-Aids, and Time Interval goal setting.
3. Do and maintain behavioral interventions. (Use all your strategies, including finding ways to manage uncomfortable feelings without pulling.)
4. Recognize slips when they happen — *and here's the big challenge* — without letting them turn into full-blown relapses. *How? With step 5.*
5. Re-establish and commit to your goals. That's relapse prevention in a nutshell.

Of course, it's much easier said than done. The key is staying focused on your goals. Monitor yourself. Divide a calendar into three sections — morning, afternoon, and evening — and chart your progress. Stay in frequent contact with a therapist. Many therapists may not have an appreciation for how intense the urges are and how recurrent and persistent they are. I find it helpful to be prepared to stay in regular e-mail or telephone contact, having my clients e-mail me each evening after they do their pull-free time block as this increases accountability.

Staying Motivated as a Way of Life

This is where positive self-talk comes in. Do a cost-benefit analysis of the reasons why you want to stop. What are the benefits of continuing to pull? What are the costs? What are the advantages of continuing to try to reduce your pulling, no matter how discouraging it can be at times? Most people find that the benefits of doing the difficult work outweigh the costs of giving up the immediate pleasure of pulling. When you feel good about your progress, you will have more hope and confidence and be motivated to continue. Feeling good about yourself is the reward that makes the recovery process worthwhile.

All of your efforts to stay on track will be augmented by your ongoing commitment to self-care. Try to maintain a healthy balance between work, play, and relationships. Exercise, diet, sleep, body and hair care are advantageous. When we have good self-care habits we are less likely to experience lapses. That's because self-care confers resilience, mindfulness, and positive motivation. When we feel centered in our body and our life, we have more energy to commit to our goals.

So be kind to yourself. And never give up. Know that slips are part of the recovery process when you are dealing with a chronic problem. In the words of Winston Churchill, "Success is the ability to fail over and over again without loss of enthusiasm." So focus on progress, not perfection. And never lose sight of the prize: fuller hair, improved self-esteem, liberation.

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