

HAIRDRESSERS JOURNAL - Helping clients with trichotillomania

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According to Dr Sam Chamberlain, Honorary Research Fellow based at Cambridge University: “Trichotillomania was traditionally thought to be quite rare, however, more recent studies suggest that it affects up to 3.5% of people at some point in their lives. Despite these findings, there is a profound lack of awareness about the condition, and little research has been conducted. We hope that our ongoing research will help us to identify better treatment options for this highly debilitating condition.”

Glenn Lyons, Clinical Director and Senior Trichologist at Philip Kingsley explains, “Trichotillomania is the habitual pulling of one’s own hair. It can be an intentional cry for help or it can develop accidentally or unintentionally (progressing from fiddling with their hair). It happens much more with women than with men and often starts when they are young girls.

“I’ve treated women who’ve been doing it for 20 years. With temporary hair loss, it usually grows back but if it goes on for a continued amount of time, it becomes permanent. Diagnosis is very important as it can be confused with alopecia areata by doctors. If you notice it with a younger person, try to speak to the mother or father. If the child’s young enough, talk to them about having a word with the teacher.”

Trichotillomania has been likened to smoking and drug addictions so can it be cured? “Absolutely,” Glenn Lyons says. “In extreme cases we refer people to psychiatrists but we are very experienced in dealing with it.”

People who have been through it themselves can also provide excellent support. Abby Rohrer stopped after 27 years twelve years ago and now offers support and encouragement via her website www.StopHairpulling.com.

Abby says, “I used to hate going to hairdressers. I felt terribly ashamed and uncomfortable about getting my hair cut or styled. The public nature of the salon meant the fear of discovery from everyone including my hairdresser. I had pulled so much from my hairline that I moved it back about an inch. If asked, I would always lie and say that the hair there just wouldn't grow.

“Having a private room for customers who are sensitive is a great idea. When someone books that private room they shouldn't be asked why. The stylist should act normally and not ask any questions but simply know that when and if a client is ready to share, they will. Also, if someone does bring up the topic, the stylist should be very careful not to judge, condescend, or be overly sympathetic. Simply respond in a matter of fact way.

“I would advise hairdressers to not confront the client at all because this is very tricky and a way to quickly lose a client for good. If a hairdresser had confronted me or even mentioned it to me, chances are I would not have returned to the salon. If you feel you

must do something, write a note letting the client know that you care, realise that this may be a sensitive issue but that if the client is pulling, they are not alone and there is help.

“Mention in the note that you will never bring it up again but that if the client wants to discuss it, you will be happy to do so. Remain aware of the extreme shame and sensitivity that hair pullers feel. The mere mention of someone pulling their hair out or discussion of bald eyelids, no eyebrows, or bald spots on the head can easily send a puller running for the hills. Once this happens it is unlikely that the puller will ever speak with the ‘offender’ again.”

Michelle*, 30, knows how that feels: “I started pulling hairs from my head when I was 12. We were told by a science teacher to pluck out a hair to examine under the microscope. I remember not wanting to but having to and after that, I couldn’t stop. I have it pretty much under control now but still wake up doing it sometimes. I’ve also noticed that if I’ve eaten loads of sugary foods this happens and also when I’m stressed or upset about things. Generally, though, it’s under control and I look as if I’ve got a full head of healthy hair as the bald spots are hidden.

“For years, I avoided hairdressers and would never return to the same one. When I go to the hairdressers now, I fake a confidence I don’t feel and if they do say anything about the breakage and re-growth, I say I used to dye my hair a lot. I’d be mortified if a hairdresser asked straight out ‘Do you pull your hair out’. My best trip to a hairdresser was when they gave me a magazine to read during my hair cut and so I didn’t have to stare at my reflection and worry the whole time.”