

// THERE'S A MISCONCEPTION THAT WE'RE CHOOSING TO PULL OUT OUR HAIR, AND COULD MAKE A CONSCIOUS DECISION NOT TO



IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

# Managing MISCONCEPTIONS

*In the second article of our series on hair loss, we explore trichotillomania – hair pulling disorder – and how to support clients.*

WORDS KATIE SMITH

**H**air loss can affect people at different life stages and for all sorts of reasons, but one common cause is trichotillomania. Often called ‘trich’, typical behaviours include uncontrollable urges to pull hair from the body, face and scalp. This can result in thinning of the hair, bald patches and discomfort.

While studies are predominantly US-based, statistics suggest 1.1 million people in the UK could have trich. It is one of a group of body-focused repetitive behaviours (BFRBs), which also includes dermatillomania (skin picking) and onychophagia (nail biting). According to estimates, one in 20 people has a BFRB – almost four million people in the UK and Ireland.

Clare Mackay, professor of neuroscience at the University of Oxford’s Department of Psychiatry, has lived with trich for more than 35 years. ‘It started with my eyelashes and the crown of my head, then my

eyebrows. Mine started with trauma – I was bullied at secondary school and found myself excluded socially.’

### Stop the stigma

Shame is a big part of trich, Clare says. ‘People with these disorders will do anything to stop anybody knowing about it.’

### MYTH BUSTING

**TRUE:** Many people with trich don’t seek treatment because of shame

**FALSE:** Those suffering can control the disorder – it’s not that simple

**TRUE:** People with trich tend to always pull from the same patches, causing bald spots and thinning of the hair

**FALSE:** Only women experience trich – it’s present in men too

**TRUE:** Trich is often associated with trauma or anxiety, but not always – it can occur on its own.

There are two reasons for this. ‘The first is beauty and attractiveness. Our hair, skin and nails are our peacock feathers. Having a condition that means you don’t look as good as you would otherwise upsets us.

‘The second is it’s something we do to ourselves. There’s a misconception that we’re choosing to pull out our hair, pick our skin or bite our nails, and could make a conscious decision not to. Everybody feels we should be able to control it.’

For a long time, Clare avoided getting her hair cut, or lied about it. ‘I would say “I’ve got some hair loss but don’t know why.” I wasn’t ready to say I was pulling out my hair.’

### Normalising trich

Hair and beauty professionals can help normalise the condition. So what should and shouldn’t you do or say to clients with trich?

‘Going to my current hairdresser, Susan Handy, is a positive experience – she’s accepted trich as part of doing my hair,’ says Clare (see *Case study* overleaf) ‘She never tells me off or



### // WITH A BIT OF KNOWLEDGE, YOU CAN MAKE A HUGE DIFFERENCE TO SOMEBODY

- asks pointed questions. She's never made me feel shame – in fact, she said: "I've seen this before, it's no big deal."

Before, hair appointments were uncomfortable. 'In my early 30s, I told a hairdresser I had a bald patch because I pull out my hair. She'd probably never come across this and didn't know what to do, so she said nothing. I was mortified. She had her hands over my head and I could tell she was uncomfortable.'

#### Knowledge is power

Understanding these conditions is key if salons and barbershops are to become BFRB-friendly, says Clare. 'The best experience I've had was when I had my eyebrows microbladed. The person mentioned trich on her website, so before I even walked through the door I knew I didn't have to explain it. When we did talk about it, she said "It's just a thing some people have." She completely normalised it and made it possible to talk openly.'

Knowing how to start the discussion is key. 'There won't be one right answer for everybody, but with a bit of knowledge you can make a huge difference to somebody,' Clare says. 'It's a tricky conversation, but knowledge is power.'

Raising awareness can help clients feel better and encourage more research. 'To develop treatments, we need people to come out of the shadows and feel less ashamed,' notes Clare. 'I want people with BFRBs to feel able to ask for and receive help.'



#### CASE STUDY CREATING A SAFE SPACE

Susan Handy, owner of Mary Handy Hair and Beauty in Henley-on-Thames, prides herself on making clients with trich feel at ease.

'It's about building a rapport. For many of my clients, I would gently ask "What's this all about?" and highlight it in a quiet way. But I would never do that with a client I've only been seeing for six months. It's taken a long time to get to that place and be able to broach it.'

'I would never say "You've got trich" to someone. It's important to instil confidence in your client and not make them feel awkward or ashamed. Give them the opportunity to open up over time, and gently encourage them to seek a diagnosis or help once they have the courage and if it's right for them.'

For clients with trich whom she knows particularly well, Susan takes photos of their scalps. 'It's powerful because they feel it but never see it. It made one client seek counselling and mindfulness, which has helped. Of course, that wouldn't work for everyone.'

Susan believes salons can be safe spaces for clients with the condition. 'It's an honour to be part of their journey. I've been thinking that one Sunday a month we could have people who suffer with trich or want to learn about it come into the salon.'

In terms of training within the industry, she adds: 'There could be courses. All apprentices need to be aware of trich. It's about making the younger generation of hairdressers look at people's scalps, be aware of differences, and take photographs.'

#### CLARE'S CHECKLIST

##### DOS AND DON'TS

- **Do tell clients:**  
'I understand that you can't help it – it's a disorder and not your fault'
- **Do say:** 'Let's see what we can do together to make you feel as good as you can'
- **Do advertise** your salon or barbershop as BFRB-friendly on your website and socials
- **Don't tell clients** to stop pulling their hair – it's not as simple as that
- **Don't ask** pointed questions
- **Don't diagnose** – instead, direct clients to further resources and support.

#### RESOURCES

- NHBf blog – Offering hair loss solutions in your salon: [nhbf.co.uk/hair-loss](https://nhbf.co.uk/hair-loss)
- BFRB UK & Ireland: [bfrbukireland.com](https://bfrbukireland.com)