

Understanding body-focused repetitive behaviours: from lived experience through mechanisms towards personalised care

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Body-focused repetitive behaviours (BFRBs), including hair pulling, skin picking and nail biting, are among the most common behavioural manifestations of psychological distress. They often begin in childhood or adolescence, yet remain surprisingly overlooked in both research and clinical practice. While many people experience these behaviours without significant distress, others experience profound impacts on their mental health, physical wellbeing and quality of life. Despite their prevalence, relatively little is known about why BFRBs develop, why they persist, or why some people respond well to treatment while others do not.

Research in this field is at an exciting turning point. Growing evidence suggests that BFRBs should not be viewed simply as isolated disorders, but as a diverse behavioural spectrum that spans different ages, presentations and underlying mechanisms. Applicants with interests spanning psychology, psychiatry, neuroscience, epidemiology, cognitive science and related disciplines are encouraged to get in touch. The precise focus of the DPhil will be developed collaboratively with the successful applicant and may draw on a range of methodologies.

Possible areas of research include:

- Characterising the diversity of BFRBs across the lifespan, including phenomenology, developmental trajectories and co-occurring conditions, to examine why people differ in their experiences, impacts and outcomes.
- Evidence synthesis and comparative effectiveness research to understand which treatments and support strategies appear most helpful, for whom, and under what circumstances.
- Experimental studies investigating the cognitive and psychological mechanisms underlying BFRBs, including attention, awareness, self-regulation and the characteristic trance-like state reported by many individuals.
- Laboratory-based studies using behavioural, neurophysiological or neuroimaging approaches to investigate the neural mechanisms of BFRBs and their relationship to consciousness, sensory processing and the skin-brain connection.

Patient and public involvement and lived experience is central to this programme of research. Regardless of the area of research, we will work closely with people with lived experience throughout the design, conduct and dissemination of our studies to ensure that the research addresses questions that matter most to those affected by BFRBs.