Body-focused repetitive behaviors

Excessive nail biting (biting one's fingernails and/or the adjacent skin) and the compulsive pulling of one's hair (trichotillomania) are impulse control disorders that are classified as body-focused repetitive behaviors.

Although the direct health consequences of nail biting are rarely severe apart from an occasional infection of the nail bed, the psychological consequences are often grave. Bitten nails are easily visible and often evoke disgust in other people. In the general population, nail biting is often equated with a nervous temperament and difficulty controlling impulsive behaviors. Many sufferers are ashamed to shake other people's hands because of the appearance of their own hands. This may in turn prompt low self-esteem and social insecurity. Some patients try to hide their fingernails, which paradoxically makes the disorder even more conspicuous.

Full, thick hair is commonly associated with health, whereas bald or balding areas on the head or the lack of eyelashes and eyebrows (typical features of trichotillomania) are often mistaken for a severe somatic illness, such as cancer. People with trichotillomania are frequently ashamed of their appearance and conceal bald patches with caps, scarves, or wigs. In many cases, sufferers totally seclude themselves from their social environment, which substantially lowers their quality of life.

Pathological skin picking is another body-focused repetitive behavior, and it is characterized by repetitive scratching, biting, and picking at the skin. Like the aforementioned behaviors, it is often associated with a low quality of life and can result in severe somatic problems.

If you are interested to learn about two evidence-based treatment manuals (variants of decoupling, habit reversal training) designed to help you reduce excessive nail biting, skin picking and/or hair pulling, please register here at no cost: https://ww3.unipark.de/uc/impulse_control

After the registration (free and anonymous) you will receive the manuals as pdf-files.

Donation

We provide the present as well as other self-help manuals at no cost. If you have benefited from the manual and/or would like to support its further development, please consider making a donation. You may donate online via this link, and you will receive an official receipt within a few days.

Preliminary research results on decoupling

A number of treatment studies have confirmed the efficacy of decoupling (see the literature listed below). This simple to learn and effective intervention has recently been recommended in several meta-analyses.
and reviews, including a systematic review by Lee et al. in *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* (2019): “Throughout the review, we found evidence of benefit for ‘variants’ of HRT [habit reversal therapy], for example ‘movement decoupling’ (Moritz and Rufer, 2011)” (p. 13).

**Literature**


**Further information**

For further information on trichotillomania, please visit the website of the TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors at [bfrb.org](http://bfrb.org), which is a nonprofit organization based in the United States whose mission is to improve the quality of life of children, adolescents, and adults with trichotillomania and related body-focused repetitive behaviors such as skin picking. TLC works to raise awareness of these disorders, promote research and treatment advances, and provide information and support to sufferers and their families.

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