

Trichotillomania is a condition where hairdressers can encourage and support their clients. Eve Menezes Cunningham looks at the problem



# HELPING TO BREAK THE HABIT



**“Don’t ask any questions but simply know that when and if a client is ready to share they will”**

People who have suffered from the condition can provide excellent support for fellow sufferers. Abby Rohrer stopped pulling her hair after 27 years and now offers support to other people via her website, [www.stophairpulling.com](http://www.stophairpulling.com)

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

People with trichotillomania know their lack of a crowning glory is self-inflicted and sometimes feel they do not deserve sympathy. Abby suggests hairdressers should act normally. “Don’t ask any questions but simply know that when and if a client is ready to share, they will,” she says. “Also, if someone does bring up the topic, simply respond in a matter-of-fact way.”


Kayleigh Corby, a stylist at Aesthetics in Maldon, Essex, found her matter-of-fact approach enabled a client to open up to her. “One of the clients has a four-year-old daughter with trichotillomania. I’d noticed it because it was odd that one side of her hair was long and curly while the other was short,” she says.

“It’s easy to notice it because in some places it will have been torn from the roots and in others, the hair will just look shorter than the rest as it grows again. I mentioned it to the mother and she explained that they’d been to see a doctor, but had been told she will grow out of it. The little girl would twist the hairs on one side of her head and pull them out.

“I suggested a shorter cut so she physically couldn’t pull it out but the mother is worried about her looking like a boy. Recently, the little girl said her mother’s hair looked lovely and I told her that hers will also look lovely one day. It’s important to remain positive especially with children.”

Another sufferer is 30-year-old Michelle. “I started pulling hairs from my head when I was 12. We were told to pluck out a hair to examine under the microscope in a science lesson. I remember not wanting to, but after that I couldn’t stop,” she says.

“Over the years I’ve read quite a lot about trichotillomania and have it much more under control. When I was in my teens I would have loved my hairdresser to have quietly told me that it had a name and that there were options for treatment.

“In some ways, it’s a cry for help, but because it’s so embarrassing, it’s really hard to admit to it. Having an understanding hairdresser could have made such a difference.” 

**Most** hairdressers can spot male pattern baldness and other types of alopecia, but there is one form of hair loss that is not always recognised.

Trichotillomania (pronounced trick-o-till-o-mania) has traditionally been thought to be rare, but research by Cambridge University suggests it can affect 3.5% of people at some time in their lives.

Clinical director and senior trichologist at the Philip Kingsley clinic in London Glenn Lyons, describes the condition. “Trichotillomania is the habitual pulling of your own hair. It can be an intentional cry for help, or it can develop accidentally or unintentionally from fiddling with the hair,” he explains.

It is much more common among women and often starts when they are young girls. “The hair loss is temporary, but where trichotillomania has occurred for many years some hair loss will be permanent,” says Glenn. “Diagnosis is very important as it can be confused with alopecia areata. If hairdressers notice it in a younger person they should try to speak to the parent.”