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# Trichotillomania and the Hair Replacement Industry

SUBHEAD

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People of all ages, genders, and backgrounds have trichotillomania. Research indicates that about 1 in 50 people experience trichotillomania in their lifetime. It usually begins in late childhood/early puberty. In childhood, it occurs about equally in boys and girls. By adulthood, 80 - 90% of reported cases are women.

## A real person. Not just a statistic.



Emily Simmons

When I was introduced to Emily Simmons, about ten months ago, I was looking for a guest blogger for Hairchat, the New Image blog. I was told that Emily is a great writer who has much to share. "Perfect!" I thought. Little did I know that Emily is so much more than a blogger. She is an aspiring model and actress as well as a TV personality featured on MTV. She is also a normal fifteen year old juggling school, extra-curricular activities, home and a boyfriend. She's a great person, sensitive and sensible, well-spoken and funny. In collaborating with her, I got to know her as a young woman who always sees the glass half full, someone who definitely vowed not to hide, but to live life to the fullest and someone who refuses to

let her condition define her, but who set out to define her condition. What condition? Trichotillomania. Since the age of eight, Emily has suffered from trichotillomania, also known as Trich.

### Who has Trich

- **About 1 in 20 people meet criteria for trich**
- **About 7 – 10 million people in the USA alone suffer from trich**
- **Mostly female; 9:1 ratio in adults (1:1 in children under 11 years)**
- **Crosses all racial and socioeconomic levels**
- **Other disorders that coincide with trich sometimes include:**
  - Depression
  - General Anxiety Disorder

### What is Trich?

Trichotillomania, or trich in short, is the systematic removal of one's hair for non-grooming purposes. Hair pulling is not limited to the scalp, but can include eyebrows, eyelashes, pubic area, legs, arms, etc. The disorder is classified, as of May 2013, as an Obsessive Compulsive Spectrum Disorder (OCD) and may be part of a larger class of disorders referred to as Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors (BFRB's). The onset of trich can cause considerable disruption and distress in all areas of a person's life, such as school, work, home and social environment. Guilt and shame surround this disorder, which is self-inflicted and unlike alopecia (an autoimmune disorder) not caused by a dermatological or physical problem. Often it is also referred to as a "hidden disorder", as many affected individuals do not want to talk freely about it. Once "public", they are often told by their surroundings to "just stop it" and are blamed for their behavior, the results of which can be seen easily with rather obvious hair loss.

### Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors include:

- **Skin picking**
- **Nail biting**
- **Nail picking**
- **Cuticle picking**
- **Lip biting**
- **Cheek biting**
- **Knuckle cracking**

### Why Pulling?

The question remains, why do people really pull their hair? Is it self-mutilation, the result of trauma or of some deeper psychological disturbance? Or is it simply a bad habit which can easily be changed?

With over 15 years experience successfully treating trich patients Dr. Suzanne Mouton-Odum, a licensed psychologist in private practice from Houston, TX, explains: "People pull because it feels good. It feels good in different ways to different people. Pulling provides sensory satisfaction; tactile, visual, oral for example. It can help to regulate the nervous system". She continues, "Pulling often occurs out of a person's awareness and can be triggered by environmental cues. What many have started as an isolated event becomes associated with a variety of internal or external cues - such as emotions, thoughts, places - and becomes a habit that occurs in many situations."

### Help is available.

There are many treatment options available for trich patients, ranging from cognitive behavioral treatment, medications and supplements to wigs, extensions and other hair replacement solutions. A crucial part in the treatment puzzle is also social and family support.

## What does this mean for hair replacement specialists?

Many of the most successful hair replacement specialists have two common traits – they are compassionate and they are creative. Compassionate in a sense that they realize that with their services they can add immeasurably to a person's life by restoring happiness, confidence and self-esteem. Hair is so intricately linked to a person's physical, mental and emotional well-being that providing someone with a full head of hair is a deeply personal and very gratifying matter. Compassionate hair replacement professionals have learned to connect with their clients on an emotional level. They become part of a client's support system like a trusted friend. There is an emotional buy-in and commitment. It's more than 'just doing hair'. They are vested in the client's progress and well-being. Creative studio owners and hair replacement specialists are not only creative in their technical skills, but also in their approach of doing business. They realize that more than ever, they need to step out of their comfort zone and find clients in places they might not have looked before through ways they might not have utilized in the past. One by-product of today's economic climate is that in order to remain successful, we have to be innovative in the way we do business. That does not mean to compromise quality, but to be proactive in how clients are located, acquired and served. With 7–10 million people in the US suffering from trich and all of these individuals needing help with their appearance and hair, the business potential for the hair replacement industry is considerable. It takes only one good connection with a local psychologist or therapist to start tapping into that pool through regular referrals. Compassionate hair replacement service with innovative hair replacement products will then be the catalyst to often lifelong (business) relationships between hair replacement specialists and their trich clients.

## How YOU can help?

Here are three pointers from hair replacement specialists to work successfully with trich clients:

1. **Create a safe place for trich clients – both, physically and emotionally**
2. **Have a private service area and set appointments during special hours that do not coincide with your regular business hours**
3. **Be supportive and non-judgmental**
4. **"You are not weird", "You are not a freak"**
5. **Normalize the behavior**
6. **"Many people have this", "It's not uncommon at all"**

### Potential Benefits of Hair Replacement for Trich clients

- **Improves self-esteem**
- **Restores confidence**
- **Improves social integration**
- **Improves overall well-being**
- **Prevents access to hair, as it creates a barrier**

### Possible Limitations of Hair Replacement for Trich clients

- **Affected clients may pull the hair from the actual hair replacement system**
- **Sometimes they lift the hair replacement system off the scalp to gain access to their own hair**
- **A young child may not properly care for the replacement hair**
- **When the times comes for the hair replacement system to be removed and free access to own hair is restored, the client may begin pulling again**



Emily with her mother

Emily continues on with her journey. She allows us to be part of it by sharing her experiences in the New Image blog [HairChatter www.hairchatter.com](http://www.hairchatter.com). If you want to get a close-up view of how living with trich really is, check out the New Image Spotlight Series dedicated to trich at [www.youtube.com/user/NewImageHair](http://www.youtube.com/user/NewImageHair) as well as Emily's MTV appearance in "True Life". It will help you to better understand how affected individuals feel and show you how to grow your business in a very rewarding way. More scientific research on trich is available from the Trichotillomania Learning Center at [www.trich.org](http://www.trich.org). Another valuable resource is [www.stoppulling.com](http://www.stoppulling.com). There is also an iPhone app "PullFree" and a great guidebook is "A Parent Guide to Hair Pulling Disorder". To contact Dr. Mouton-Odum directly, feel free to call her at 713-914-9944 or visit [www.houstonpsychologists.com](http://www.houstonpsychologists.com). 📞

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