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“I thought I’d be bald for ever”

Student Charlotte Acres, 22, has suffered from trichotillomania – compulsive hair pulling – since she was a child. The disorder left her bald and wrecked her adolescence. Here she talks to Jane Purcell about her battle to overcome it Photograph by Sarah Turton

I was about eight years old when I began pulling out my hair. It started off with single strands and then it became small clumps. I don’t know why I started, there certainly wasn’t any particular trigger. I was just a normal child, although I used to get anxious sometimes about schoolwork.

At first I tried to hide it by parting my hair differently or wearing big head-bands, but it wasn’t long before my parents realised what I was doing to myself. After about a year it had become so bad that it was very noticeable, no matter how hard I tried to disguise it. Eventually my crown was bald.

Pulling out my hair would relieve the stress and anxiety and make me feel better. It didn’t hurt, not even when I pulled out handfuls at a time. Bizarrely, it felt really good.

I never pulled it in front of other people. I was so ashamed of

was actually a proper name for it.

My father is a GP and my mother is a nurse, but even they had never heard of trichotillomania.

When it got really bad, I used to worry about what people thought I looked like. I would look in the mirror and hate myself. I’d think, “What have I done to myself? I have got to stop this.” But it had become an addiction. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t stop. The angrier I got with myself, the more I wanted to do it.

I was lucky in one respect. The children at school that I told were really understanding and no one ever picked on me because of it.

My parents were really good about it too, but they didn’t know how to help. At first they thought it might have been caused by depression, so when I was 11 I went on anti-depressants.

When that made no difference,

my hair grew back. But 12 months later I was at it again. I saw school counsellors but none of them could help.

The problem had begun to dominate my life. I was at the age where I was starting to date boys and I wanted my hair to look nice. But constant pulling damages root follicles so new hair can’t grow back. I was resigned to being bald, and for years I just tried to cover up with hair-bands.

Then, last August, I was on the internet and saw something about hair extensions. I thought it would be wonderful to have hair again.

I typed in hair extensions on a search engine and found the Mark Glenn Hair Enhancement salon in London, which specialises in female hair loss. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw what they had done for someone who had no hair.

I found out that the studio had treated over 200 clients with trichotillomania in the last two years. I was overwhelmed with relief when I realised that I wasn’t mad but suffering from a proper medical condition.

I went for a consultation and they put in a test strand to see how it felt. Then they told me to go away and think about it. I was really impressed and couldn’t wait to have the treatment done. It was very expensive, with the initial work costing £1,000 and a further

£175 for six-weekly check-ups. My parents saw how much it meant to me to have hair again, so they offered to pay for it.

At the salon they weaved a mesh, known as the Kinsey System mesh, into my own hair and then sewed hair extensions into it. I



style it just as if it were my own hair and even go swimming.

I have to go back to the salon every six weeks for them to tighten up the mesh, but it’s just like visiting a normal hairdresser. My own hair can grow under the mesh and I can’t get my fingers in to

pull – in theory anyway.

A couple of months ago when I wasn’t very well and had to go into hospital, I forced my way in under the mesh and pulled a bit of my own hair. It only happened once and they were very understanding at the salon.

The treatment has been expensive but it has made me so much more confident and given me the chance to chat with others at the salon who are in the same position.

I used to feel really guilty about pulling my hair and think people would hate me for it, but the staff

THE FACTS

- Trichotillomania is an impulse control disorder that compels a person to pull out hair from any part of the body, including the scalp, eyebrows, eyelashes or pubic region.
- Onset tends to be around puberty and there are an estimated one million sufferers in Britain, with 90 per cent of these believed to be women.
- Hair loss is usually considerable and it is not unknown for people to end up completely bald.
- Pulling is often done in secret, with efforts taken to conceal the hair loss. For some, the compulsion is mild and can be quelled with extra awareness and concentration, for others the urge may be so strong that thinking of anything else is almost impossible.
- The exact cause is unknown but some experts believe it may be triggered by depression, a chemical imbalance in the brain or may even be hereditary.
- Another theory links it to obsessive compulsive disorder and says that hair pulling takes place to reduce anxiety.
- Cognitive behaviour therapy and anti-depressants usually help. Alternative therapies include hypnosis, dietary changes and exercise.
- For support, visit www.trichotillomania.co.uk.

at Mark Glenn have explained that it is a real condition and can’t be helped. When people asked me why I was bald, I used to blank them but now I can talk about it.

I used to think I would have trichotillomania for the rest of my life but now I’ve had this treatment I’m really determined to stop.

I can finally see and understand what it means to have lovely hair. The next step is to make sure it is all my own from now on. ☺

Mark Glenn Hair Enhancement Studio (020 7495 6969 or www.markglenn.com)