The bell rings. I have Calculus last period and tend to find myself getting lost in my thoughts often. As I gather up my books, I look down and notice a small pile of hair on my notebook. I immediately look around to make sure nobody’s looking before sweeping the hair away onto the floor. While everyone else is heading to the buses, I go in the opposite direction to the girl’s bathroom. I look in the mirror and see that the left end of my eyebrow is getting pretty bare. This is not the first time this has happened. I didn’t even realize what I was doing until the bell rang and snapped me out of my daze. Nobody knows it, but I also have a bald spot behind my ear. I never wear my hair up anymore because I don’t want my friends or parents to ask me about it. I don’t get it, sometimes I pull out my hair and don’t even know it like today in Calculus. Other times, I just feel like there’s this tension building up in me and I can’t stop. Even though I don’t want to do it, it feels right in the moment but then I almost always feel guilty and ashamed afterwards. I’m afraid of telling anyone. What if they think I’m weird or I’m just doing it to get attention? I’ve tried stopping myself but I feel like I can’t. I don’t know what to do!

**What are Body Focused Repetitive Behaviors?**

Body focused repetitive behaviors (BFRB’s) include a group of disorders such as trichotillomania (hair pulling disorder), nail-biting disorder, and excoriation disorder (skin picking).

BFRB’s are complicated disorders in which people repeatedly engage in behaviors they don’t want to do. These behaviors lead to negative physical, social, and psychological results. BFRB’s can take up a lot of time and negatively impact relationships, school or work.
Someone struggling with a BFRB is usually confused by their disorder. They don’t want to do this. They may also feel alone, out of control, and ashamed. As a result, they may keep their BFRB a secret. Typically, this can lead to people trying to find other ways to cope with their BFRB like hiding or covering up and avoiding social or public activities to prevent someone from noticing or judging them.

**Why do I do what I do?**

A BFRB is not a nervous tic or habit that you just haven’t grown out of. Individuals with a BFRB have to deal with significant distress due to physical, social, and psychological consequences. People who engage in a BFRB such as skin-picking or hair-pulling usually do so in response to something stressful. These triggers can include meeting sensory needs, regulating emotions, thought patterns such as “hair should be symmetrical,” a need to make the area feel or look right (e.g., bumps, coarse hair, uneven growth), and environmental triggers like looking in the mirror, driving, or leaning on your hand.

A BFRB can be broken down into two categories:

1) You feel a significant need and pressure to do it. You keep doing the behavior even if you don’t want to because it relieves stress.

2) The behavior is automatic. In this case, it happens in “zoning out” situations like sitting in class or at your office desk, watching television, talking on the phone or when alone. The level of awareness can vary. There may be times when you don’t even realize you are engaging in a BFRB and other times when you are fully aware but feel like you can’t stop.

**What causes BFRB’s?**

We don’t know the exact cause of BFRB’s. However, research shows that it can be caused by a combination of environmental and familial stressors, coping responses, genetics, temperament and age when symptoms started.

**How is it treated?**

Increasing awareness around BFRBs and its treatment is an important first step. Research shows that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) leads to good short and long term results.

The first step is to increase knowledge around when, where, and why the behavior occurs. As a part of comprehensive treatment, we do a thorough assessment and have you keep a monitoring record. Using the self-monitoring record, we can identify internal and external triggers. Then, we choose strategies that help you cope better with whatever triggers your behavior, whether it is pulling, picking, or biting.

Using the information from the monitoring record, we create an individualized treatment plan addressing all areas of concern (motor, sensory, location, affective, and cognitive).

Treatment involves working towards changing and managing the behavior and learning alternative ways to respond to unhelpful thoughts and feelings.

Trichotillomania (Hair Pulling), Nail Biting Disorder, and Skin Picking: Understand the Basics
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When you are in therapy for a BFRB such as Trichotillomania (Hair Picking) or Excoriation (Skin Picking) Disorder, you work together with your therapist to help you learn and implement new coping strategies. You also learn how to put together and lean on a good support network. Finally, you learn how to give yourself the space and acceptance to look at set backs as a part of the process.

Having compassion for yourself and a willingness to use your new coping skills helps keep you ahead of your BFRB.

Remember, your BFRB is NOT who you are.