
BOOK REVIEW

Fred Penzel

The hair-pulling problem. A complete guide to trichotillomania

Oxford University Press, 2003. XXX + 351 pp.

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Have you ever wondered why people pull their own hair? Why is it so hard to stop? Have you ever been confused about which book to recommend to those suffering from trichotillomania? The problem affects 6 to 8 million people in the United States alone. For those who pull, quality of life may be significantly impaired and yet they are unable to stop. *The hair-pulling problem* is designed to provide support and help for anyone who has suffered in isolation because of trichotillomania.

Dr. Penzel is a licensed psychologist and one of America's leading experts on obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCD). Currently he is the executive director of Western Suffolk Psychological Services where he specializes in the Cognitive/Behavioral treatment of OCD. Dr. Penzel is a founding member of both the International Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder Foundation (IOCDF) and the Trichotillomania Learning Center (TLC) Science Advisory Boards. He is also a member of the advisory board of the United Kingdom's National Phobic's Society. In addition, not only has he written numerous papers and books on several OC problems, as a psychologist, he also treats patients to get well and stay well. *The hair-pulling problem* reflects therefore his diversified clinical experience as well as up-to-date valuable scientific knowledge. Dr. Penzel is also the author of the highly successful handbook *Obsessive-compulsive disorders*.

Foreword is written by Christina Pearson, Founder and Director of the Trichotillomania Learning Center and a former sufferer of trichotillomania herself. When she first noticed her pulling habit, she was thirteen. *"I am reading. The words stream across the page, interspersed with multiple micro-breaks of attention as I glance at the end of a hair root before biting off the end and letting the hair fall lifelessly to the carpet next to me. (...) The tips of my fingers tingle with electrical recognition when a proper hair is found. It is as if I have struck gold when I find the right kind. Then, it must be removed. (...) When I finally put down the book, with a sense of total separateness I view the pile of long blonde hair that lies on the floor. (...) There is no comprehension. It must not have really happened, I tell myself."* Mrs. Pearson then goes on to tell us just how relieving it was to discover that there

are millions of people suffering in silence because of the same problem. Following recognition, she engaged in a decades long battle with trichotillomania. If only *The hair-pulling problem* was available at that time, she admits, it would have made her struggle easier.

Dr. Penzel starts his book by explaining trichotillomania. The first chapter describes the disorder in detail; it includes some signs of pulling, the ways of disguises, up to challenges of distinguishing it from other diagnoses such as perfectionism (what he calls 'pseudo-trichotillomania'). As a clinician, Dr. Penzel does not ignore the psychological consequences of pulling such as shame, stigma and the self-esteem trap. In Chapter 3 readers may find the causes of pulling explained by different models from the psychoanalytic to the yeast allergy point of view. In this chapter Dr. Penzel drafts his own model about trichotillomania: the Stimulus Regulation Model which reflects on the hair-pulling as a way to regulate an internal state of sensory imbalance in those genetically prone to develop hair-pulling (under- and overstimulation model). Chapter 4 describes some facts about hair, its structure, hair loss and

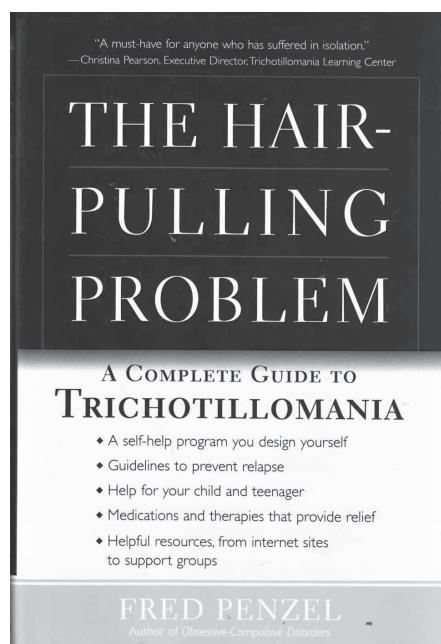
popular hair myths.

Chapters 5 to 8 are about treatment and maintenance. The author describes in detail the different treatment options (available in the United States) from talking therapies to self-help and medication. Dr. Penzel lists various recommendations for the various causes of the same problem. He does not fail to mention that above all, commitment is what brings real success.

Chapters 9 and 10 are about trichotillomania in children and the social environment. The author elegantly draws the line between "normality", possible parental/friendly intervention and the need for professional help. Chapter 11 is about the resources for getting help – again mainly in the United States.

Readers may also find tests in Appendix for self-diagnostic and for research purposes.

The hair-pulling problem is packed with scientific information in a comprehensible manner to reach those affected and therefore need it the most. The volume may well be the first step towards rehabilitation although and admittedly not



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the only step. Nevertheless, the book focuses on encouraging responsibility for the self, activity instead of passive acceptance of treatment. It offers hope; trichotillomania is a recognized and relatively well-studied problem with a wide

range of treatment options. Anyone who is a sufferer himself or knows someone dear affected by hair-pulling will find this book a helpful resource of up-to-date information on trichotillomania.

Anikó Maráz

ELTE Department of Clinical Psychology and Addiction
ELTE Doctoral School of Psychology
Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: aniko.maraz@gmail.com