

# Why I pulled out my hair

For 30 years, Neomie da Costa struggled to understand her strange compulsion

The first time it happened was while I was alone in my bedroom at the age of 11. One minute I was idly twiddling my hair round my finger: the next, I had a clump in my hand. I'd yanked it clean out of my head.

As I stared at it, I was aware of a dull ache on my scalp. But strangely, the overwhelming feeling was one of relief. I felt all my worries had disappeared, along with the hair.

I tried to work out why I might have done it — and why I'd enjoyed it so much. The truth was, I just didn't know.

I hadn't had a particularly unhappy start in life. My parents were still together: I had two sisters, Sarah and Jane, whom I idolised.

But I always felt there was something missing. Jane and Sarah were a lot older than me, and they moved out when I was still quite young. I missed them desperately.

To make things worse, Mum and Dad rowed constantly and, in

*As the disruption in my life increased, so did the hair-pulling'*

her frustration, Mum took all her problems out on me.

It was a lot to cope with on top of the pressures of growing up, and in the end I preferred to lock myself away in my room alone.

It was against this background that my hair-pulling first started.

I guess it was a subconscious way of relieving stress at first. And it was only the odd strand or clump, hardly noticeable if you weren't looking for it.

As for the pain, it didn't bother me.

But like all addictions, it soon got out of control.

I moved schools and then, when I was 13, my parents split up. As the disruption in my life increased, so did the hair-pulling.

By the time I was 14, it was happening regularly. I never did it where others could see, but always on my own in my room.



David Levenson

Still I believed I could keep it under control. But then something happened which made it far worse.

One day at school, the teacher began a sex education lesson. And as I listened, a horrible truth sank in. It dawned on me that for years I'd been sexually abused.

At the time, I hadn't realised the significance of what the man — a distant relative — had done. But as I learned more about sex, I realised

that him touching me when we were alone had been very wrong.

I told my family at once, but they decided not to take it any further. Instead, they chose to protect me by making sure I was never left alone with him again.

But while they might have been able to move on, it hit me hard.

Soon, I was pulling out such enormous clumps that people couldn't help but notice.

'What's wrong with her?' Mum asked the doctor.

But he had no idea. Even the psychologist I was referred to didn't really know what to say, and after a few months, I stopped going altogether.

I began dating and always told

boyfriends about my hair-pulling. Luckily they didn't seem to mind.

But I minded. I was aware this wasn't normal behaviour. But I just couldn't stop. I loved how it felt at the time, even though afterwards I hated myself.

I also detested the sight of myself in the mirror — I had bald patches all over my head. Even covering it up with wigs didn't help. It made me feel even more conspicuous.

It continued after I'd left school. Doctors remained baffled. 'I can give you anti-depressants,' said one. I was outraged. I needed help, not pills. I just didn't know where to turn for it.

Finally, six years ago, at the age of 34, I made a breakthrough.

One day, I typed 'hair-pulling' into an internet search engine. To my surprise, the screen filled with numerous websites on the subject.

I learned that the condition was called 'trichotillomania'. I was stunned. Not only did other people do it, but it was common enough to have its own name.

I read about other people's experiences,

finally realising I wasn't alone, that I wasn't a freak. It gave me hope.

I made a diary of how often I pulled and how I felt when I did. It helped me pinpoint my vulnerable moments. I had to concentrate on keeping my hands away from my head whenever I felt like pulling.

Over time, it became easier. And talking about it with other sufferers also helped enormously.

At the same time I started learning everything I could about my condition, and subsequently developed my own treatment, which I call 'trichotherapy'.

It involves hypnotherapy and behaviour therapy, which I use to help others like me.

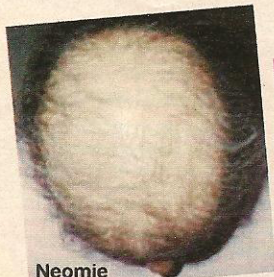
I'm not convinced there's a cure, but I believe it's possible to get it under control with the right help.

I've now been 'pull-free' for more than 18 months. It's a struggle but I keep going.

And I hope that by reading this, other sufferers will realise they're not alone.

*As told to Louise Garrett*

● For information, visit Neomie's [www.trichotillomania.co.uk](http://www.trichotillomania.co.uk) website.



Neomie had a huge bald patch

Trichotillomania usually begins around puberty, and can start with hair-pulling from the scalp, lashes or eyebrows. It has been spotted in children as young as 18 months, and in adults who've suffered some sort of trauma. Treatments are varied, but most commonly consist of cognitive therapy — an emotional and behavioural approach that examines when someone is most likely to pull and what they can do when they feel like pulling.