

Chloe Altenhofen

Professor McCarthy

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Trichotillomania

It is a common tradition to make a wish on a fallen eyelash, but what happens when there are no more wishes to make? Trichotillomania is the urge to pull out hair from the head, eyebrows, or, in my case, eyelashes. Having no eyelashes can be very unsettling to the average person. Eyelashes are necessary for the safety of our eyes, as they are the “dust collectors” that protect the iris. Pulling eyelashes out can be painful and dangerous, as it creates an entrance for germs and dust to enter the eyeball. Friends, parents, and even romantic partners have found my trichotillomania to be extremely concerning, or even disgusting. For example, when I was in middle school, my older sister told me, “No one will ever love you without eyelashes. It’s really disturbing and gross.” Those words have resonated with me for years, causing me to feel ashamed of myself, but I now understand the reason she said that. Trichotillomania is uncommon to people, and sometimes having no eyelashes can make people feel uneasy or off-putting. Anxiety is one of the hardest mental health patterns to cope with, since it comes in unexpected waves. My brain has been wired to cope with stress and anxiety in a very specific way through trichotillomania. People who struggle with this condition should not be ashamed of coping with their stress in various habits. Everyone comes from different walks of life, and along those walks, we must figure out how to cope with the hardships.

My earliest memory of trichotillomania was in the elementary school cafeteria. My friend had noticed an eyelash that fell from my eye and encouraged me to make a wish. I had no idea of this tradition and proceeded to make a wish. I felt unsatisfied with the wish I made, and asked, “If I pull out another eyelash, can I make a new wish?” My friend believed it would work and encouraged me to, so I pulled out my first eyelash. It’s almost like a Lego piece clicked in my brain. The satisfaction I received when I pulled out the eyelash became addictive. From that point forward, I began pulling out my eyelashes with little understanding as to why it was so addicting. I decided to ask my older sister if it is okay to pull out my eyelashes. She was in disbelief and proceeded to yell at me: “You better stop that before I tell mom you are harming yourself!” Being a young child, I was terrified and stopped for good, or so I thought.

Middle school was peak anxiety for me, being the “weird art kid” in a class of thirty kids. The urge to pull out my eyelashes grew stronger every day, so I allowed it to happen. Girls started wearing makeup, getting their hair dyed, and growing in popularity. I wanted to experiment with makeup but found it difficult to apply mascara with the sparse eyelashes I had. Both of my eyelids had a gaping bald spot in the middle, with long eyelashes at the inner and outer corners. I applied mascara to the eyelashes and left the bald spot open, since there were no eyelashes to coat. I had left the house thinking no one would notice, but the mascara accentuated the bald spot even more. When I arrived at school, a peer approached me and asked “What happened to your eyes? Where did your eyelashes go?” I was completely thrown off, as I expected no one would notice. I explained that I pulled them out, and they responded with a disgusted look. “Doesn’t that hurt? That’s gross.” Tears began welding in my eyes as I tried to give them a response, but I simply walked away. I felt embarrassed and disrespected. From that

point forward, the pulling only got worse as I hyper focused on how people would perceive me with no eyelashes.

My first ever boyfriend was in my sophomore year of high school. It lasted two weeks, but they felt like the best two weeks of my entire year. By this stage in my life, I was well educated on makeup. I began wearing false eyelashes to hide my trichotillomania and was a lot more comfortable in my skin. I was extremely nervous to be around my first boyfriend without makeup on. I was traumatized by previous reactions I had gotten from people, so I held off on telling him. One day, he came to my house when I had no makeup on. I explained to him my condition before he could question, and he was extremely accepting and even told me I was beautiful with or without makeup. That was simply all a lie, as we broke up a week and a half later. He got bored of me and lost all attraction entirely. I was heartbroken to see a picture of him with another girl the next day and decided to move on with my life. A week later, I was hanging out with a few people that were also friends with my so-called ex. One of the friends had mentioned he heard I had no eyelashes. My heart sank, and I was confused as to how he knew that information. He told me my ex mentioned it to him. I felt betrayed that my ex would spread personal information about me to his friends. Then, his friend proceeded to tell me “He told me you look ugly without makeup.” I began feeling insecure about my condition and refused to let anyone see me without fake eyelashes. I wanted revenge, so I decided to smear Vaseline on my ex’s car while he wasn’t home. I do regret my actions, but the satisfaction I got from it was better than pulling out my eyelashes.

To this day, I still pull out my eyelashes to cope with the anxiety of being a college student. I have tried countless methods to dispel my trichotillomania. I started by putting band-aids on my fingers to prevent me from pulling. That was extremely uncomfortable, so I tried fake

nails. The fake nails restrained me from using my real nails to pull out my eyelashes. Eventually, I ended up taking my nails off, or even using tweezers to get around the barrier I put up. Many individuals I have spoken with recommend fidget toys or therapy. I have tried both, and nothing worked. Somehow, I still managed to find a way to pull them out, and soon enough, I grew to accept it. I am a lot more comfortable with my condition, and don't wear fake eyelashes as much. Many people do not notice my lack of eyelashes unless I mention it. I am no longer ashamed of my anxiety coping mechanism and see it as a vital routine for me to relieve my brain. I have conditioned myself to believe it is not harming myself the way people think, and rather it is doing good for my mental health. Many people beg to differ, but they do not understand how difficult it is for me to stop. Self-control is hard when your brain is filled with anxious and stressful thoughts, so rather than controlling myself to stop pulling, I allow it to happen.

Currently, I am in therapy to help with my stress and anxiety. My therapist does not shame me for my trichotillomania and fully understands the difficulty I have with preventing it. My therapist teaches me new ways to cope with anxiety and stress as an alternative to pulling out my eyelashes. The less stress and anxiety I have, the less I will pull my eyelashes. Allowing people's words to affect the way you operate in your daily life can create a spike in anxiety and cause trauma. Those words are projections from their own internal thoughts and should never be taken personally. My peers didn't help me become comfortable in my skin; I did. I accepted what I have always been shamed for and feel content with my life. I recall the wish I made that day in elementary school; It was to be happy with myself. I am proud to say it came true.