

News

A hair-pulling disorder;New findings get to root of Tourette's-like malady

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Cassy Stott thought it was normal to be super picky about her hair. If her curly locks went astray, she would simply pluck out the strands that were out of place.

But the 24-year-old Taunton resident had no idea those were the signs of something more serious - until her hair started whittling away. "It was always like a joke that I had an OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) with pulling my hair," she said. "But my mom found online that this was a disease . . . and then I was missing one little spot in my hair."

Stott was diagnosed with trichotillomania, a psychiatric disorder where hair plucking helps bring relief, gratification or pleasure - but ultimately results in a noticeable - if not alarming - loss of locks.

Between 1 and 3 percent of the population, mostly women, have the pulling plague, said Dr. Nancy Keuthen, co-director of the trichotillomania clinic at Massachusetts General Hospital. "There are different things that trigger 'trich,' " she said. "It could be an internal sense of discomfort . . . (for) some people it's the sight or feel of hair."

For Sara Bosies, 24, of Keene, N.H., immense pressure from her mother to be "perfect" triggered her to yank out her hair and eyelashes starting when she was 7 years old. She now wears a wig to help boost her self-confidence.

Pulling is "a good pain," she said. "You know how people like tattoos? It's like that. It's a good release when the root comes out."

New data show trichotillomania may be genetic and linked to Tourette's Syndrome, said Keuthen.

"Historically people look at 'trich' as being similar to an OCD since it is a repetitive driven behavior," she said. "But when we looked at brain volumes in part of the putamen, reduced volumes were found in that part of the brain. That's the same finding found in Tourette's."

There is no miracle cure for trichotillomania, but habit-reversal training and medications help, said Keuthen. Doctors encourage keeping busy or covering up the head.

But fighting the disorder requires more than staying preoccupied. It involves having a lot of faith. "I tell myself not to do it every single day, but I still do it," said Stott. "But I am taking it each day, an hour at a time."

Bosies feels the same way.

"It's like I am looking at myself through a glass wall and I can't stop myself. But (trichotillomania) has made me a stronger person because I've learned to accept it."

PLAGUED: Cassy Stott, who suffers from trichotillomania, a syndrome that compels her to pull out her hair, sits in her Taunton apartment yesterday. Before she yanked out her locks, Stott sported a drastically different hairdo, shown inset. Staff photo by David Goldman

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