

Understanding Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors (BFRBs)

A Quick Guide for Clinicians



What are BFRBs?

Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors (BFRBs) are characterized by the recurrent and often distressing self-grooming behaviors that result in physical damage and/or significant psychosocial impairment. These can include hair pulling (trichotillomania), skin picking (excoriation disorder), nail biting (onychophagia), cheek biting, lip biting, and others.

Key Characteristics and Diagnostic Considerations

- **Repetitive Nature:** These behaviors are repetitive and persistent, despite repeated attempts to stop.
- **Not Just “Bad Habits”:** BFRBs are more than just simple habits and often involve underlying emotional or psychological factors.
- **Distress and Impairment:** These behaviors cause significant distress, functional impairment (social, occupational, etc.), and/or physical injury.
- **Not Due to Other Conditions:** BFRBs are differentiated from other conditions (e.g., tics, obsessive-compulsive disorder, dermatological issues).

Why are BFRBs Important for Clinicians to Understand?

- **Prevalence:** One in every 20 people experience BFRBs.
- **Under-Recognition:** Many people experience shame or embarrassment and go to great lengths to hide the behavior and its consequences. This leads to further sense of isolation. Many people are unaware that these are treatable conditions.
- **Impact on Mental Health:** There is a high co-occurrence with anxiety, depression, and OCD.

Action Items for Clinicians: How to Help

- **Observe for Physical Signs:** Be observant of potential physical signs (e.g., noticeable hair loss patterns, extensive lesions, scabs and/or scars, nail damage). Remember that many people are good at hiding physical signs.
- **Normalize the Conversation with Brief Screening Questions:** Clinical providers can create a safe and non-judgmental space by asking simple questions to help identify potential BFRBs (e.g., “Do you ever find yourself repeatedly pulling out your hair, picking your skin, or biting your nails to the point of causing noticeable issues or distress? Have you tried to stop these behaviors?”).
- **Provide Psychoeducation and Validation:** Briefly explain what BFRBs are, the surprising high prevalence, and that effective behavioral treatments exist.
- **Assess Co-occurring Conditions:** Screen for anxiety, depression, and OCD.
- **Referral Information:** Provide clear guidance on when and where to refer patients to specialists experienced in treating BFRBs (e.g., therapists specializing in habit reversal training, acceptance and commitment therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy; dermatology for skin damage).

Resources

- The TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors – <http://BFRB.org/>
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America – <https://adaa.org/>
- Free From BFRB – <https://www.free-from-bfrb.org/>
- International OCD Foundation (IOCDF) – <http://IOCDF.org/>