

I Couldn't Stop Picking At My Face

True Health Drama

But now Valerie has found an unusual cure...

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, horrified – my skin was covered in scabs, red-raw and puffy. A trail of blood snaked down my cheek!

I looked like I'd been attacked. Truth was, I'd done the damage to myself.

I'd been doing it every day since I was 12 years old.

Picking my skin, scraping at spots – real and imagined.

I'd spend at least 20 minutes clawing skin on my face, arms, shoulders, chest and breasts.

I'd dig away at any tiny mark or blemish, in a daze,

and my skin was covered in scars and dents.

At the time, I enjoyed it. But afterwards I'd feel sick and ashamed.

I just want to be normal, I thought.

I can't remember why I started, but I do remember it felt so good the first time.

I'd lock myself in the bathroom and spend 20 minutes picking. I was so out of it, I didn't feel pain, even when I drew blood.

My parents batted away my hands but they couldn't watch me all the time.

Soon I was covered in small scabs.

And other people noticed.

'What's wrong with your arms?' a boy at school asked. 'Do you have some sort of disease?'

Filled with shame, I blinked away tears.

From then on, I covered up. I never dated and even kept my friends at a distance.

Who'd want to be with me anyway. I was a freak.

Of course my parents were worried and arranged for me to see a psychiatrist.

He suggested that I was self-harming. *But was I?*

It never felt right to me. I didn't want to hurt myself.

I just wanted to feel clean.

Then in 2009 my mum, Ninnie, showed me an article

I'm focussing on getting better...



VALERIE LECLAIR, 25, Ontario, Canada

THE FACTS

Dermatillomania is the repeated urge to pick at the skin in order to get rid of any spots, blemishes, or perceived flaws. It can be a way to relieve anxiety and is often carried out to the point of pain or scarring. It can cause low self-esteem, depression and social withdrawal.

How is it treated?

People find it hard to stop on their own. At present, there's no clear treatment for the condition, but counselling has been found to help because it deals with underlying psychological factors.

that she'd read in a magazine.

'It's about this woman who has something called dermatillomania,' she said.

It was a condition also known as compulsive skin picking, where you have a repeated urge to pick at your skin.

It was like a lightbulb coming on in my head. Firstly, what I was doing had a name.

And even better, I wasn't the only one who was doing this!

Me and mum showed the article to my psychiatrist who agreed it was what I had.

It wasn't a solution. There was no easy cure for dermatillomania but at least now I knew what I was dealing with.

I started to think about what triggered me to pick, like when I was feeling bored, or anxious.

Next I took up knitting and crocheting, reaching for the needles whenever I felt the urge to pick.

I've found that keeping my

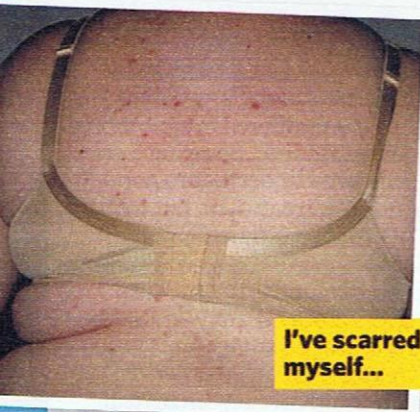
hands busy has really helped.

The biggest change now is that I'm not ashamed any more. I've got a medical condition. I'm not a freak.

Now I'm focussing all my energy on getting better.

I will beat this. ●

'I'm not a freak - I'll beat this!'



I've scarred myself...

Men's Health With Dr Chris Brown

Q My husband's been on antidepressants for at least five years. Should he have stopped them by now? I'm worried that he'll be hooked on them forever.

Samia, Ilkeston

A I assume this is on doctor's advice and that he's regularly reviewed to see if he still needs them. If not, he should see his GP. But he must not stop his tablets without medical advice, nor stop them suddenly after all this time.

Worried about hubby

