

Seven Stages of Healing for Compulsive Hair Pullers

By Claudia Miles, M.A., MFT, Copyright 2001

I. **Acceptance:** Accepting the self as worthy and/or lovable, even while still pulling. Though it seems paradoxical, if one is able to accept one's self as a puller, the pulling no longer has the charge or the negative "pay off" for the psyche.

II. **Self Forgiveness:** Forgiving the self; ending the shame/self-blame cycle. Viewing the puller as an unhappy and frightened child who needs love and soothing, not as a "disgusting," "weak," or "bad" part of the self. Changing one's attitude accordingly.

III. **Investigation:** Listening to the message of the "Inner Puller:" Some part of the self is trying to get our attention via the pulling; if we can hear the message behind the pulling, the pulling no longer has a purpose. (If the pulling is 'saying' "my needs aren't being met," and the puller learns to express those desires to either him/herself or a partner, this can lessen the need to pull.)

IV. **Understanding Pulling as Self-Soothing:** Understanding that in pulling, one is trying to soothe oneself, not self-destruct, often in the midst of painful feelings-grief, anger, and anxiety. To address this, we learn to 1) listen to and be with feelings that seem "intolerable," so it is not necessary to escape via pulling; 2) learn to soothe oneself in other ways such as loving self-talk, an attitude of compassion toward the self, and engaging in activities that both feel good and are supportive of the self; 3) learn and practice relaxation techniques.

V. **Waking Up:** Bringing awareness to the process of pulling so that one begins to "wake up" sooner in the pulling experience. This is done through relaxation, meditation and developing the "observer" within.

VI. **Hope:** Believing that it is possible to "get well" can be an important stage in healing. This can often be achieved by getting to know other pullers who have stopped. Prayer, meditation, and other spiritual involvement can also help.

VII. **Addressing the Habit:** Sometimes, when all the other inner work has been done, one is still left with the "habit" of pulling when watching TV, talking on the phone, driving, etc. Once self-blame, shame and self-loathing have been addressed, behavioral techniques-choosing an alternate activity to do with one's hands, for example-can be helpful.