Skin Picking Disorder:
Top Twelve Roadblocks to Recovery
(…and some tips for how to deal with them)

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What would you call a condition that nobody talks about…except for the millions of people who have it, each of whom thinks that they’re the only person in the world who has it? If you were to do a brief online search, you might find this condition described as Dermatillomania, Compulsive Skin Picking, Chronic Skin Picking, Pathogenic Excoriation, Neurotic Excoriation, or just plain skin picking. And if you were to try to explain it to someone, you might describe it as “that thing I do that I try to hide from everyone but people see anyway – that thing I don’t talk about that is painful, awkward and embarrassing, and makes me want to hide from the world.”

Now, after years of being ignored by the psychiatric community, “that thing I do” has finally been recognized as a legitimate condition and given a formal name. In May 2013, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) published the newly revised version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (fifth edition), better known as the DSM-5. In this updated version of the manual, the editors have at last acknowledged the existence of this common but greatly misunderstood
problem, and have given it an “official” and easily recognizable name – “Excoriation (Skin Picking) Disorder”, or less formally, “Skin Picking Disorder”.

Anyone who has suffered with Skin Picking Disorder knows the silent shame that accompanies it every day. Part of that shame is rooted in the belief that a “normal” person doesn’t tear into their skin – that a “normal” person doesn’t lose control of their behavior to the point of causing so much damage to themselves. And part comes from the fact that most psychologists and therapists are absolutely clueless about this condition and how to effectively treat it.

Since 1999, the therapists at the OCD Center of Los Angeles have treated hundreds of people with Skin Picking Disorder. There is no one “type” of person who suffers with this destructive condition. Our clients come in every color and from every walk of life - women, men, teens, college students, waitresses, professionals, stay-at-home-moms, and grandparents. Treatment isn’t quick or easy, but it is effective for those who are willing to commit to taking the steps needed to learn how to manage the powerful urge to pick that is at the core of this condition.

This short e-book won’t attempt to provide you with a full course of treatment for Skin Picking Disorder. But it will give you some easy to understand tips on the steps you will need to take in order to start down the road to freeing yourself from this often devastating condition. Here
are the top twelve things you **don’t** want to do if you are serious about overcoming your skin picking.

1. **Expecting an instant “cure.”** You didn’t get to this level of skin picking overnight, and it won’t go away overnight. So don’t set yourself up for disappointment and failure with this big go-nowhere expectation. Progress takes time and effort, and is often an up and down process. Slip-ups are a normal – picking less, and then more, and then less, is a normal, predictable, and expected part of the process. Think two steps forward, one step back. Also, progress may alternate between internal and external changes. So for some, learning to better express your internal emotions may coincide with a temporary increase in picking. There may be some down days, but as long as the overall trend is towards less picking, then you are on the road to success. It may sound like a cliché, but it is important to remember that this is marathon, not a sprint.

2. **Thinking that the “right” medication will stop your skin picking.** We are licensed psychotherapists, not psychiatrists, so we don’t give “medical” advice. But we can say that we have never seen a medication **by itself** stop a person from skin picking. Numerous research studies have found that the key to effective treatment for Skin Picking Disorder and related conditions such as Hair Pulling Disorder (Trichotillomania) is **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** combined
with mindfulness strategies. That said, there are lots of medications that are used for the treatment of Skin Picking Disorder, and the correct medication for you may be helpful if you combine it with CBT and mindfulness. But be aware that for many people, medication may be accompanied by side effects that are uncomfortable – agitation, insomnia, exhaustion, weight gain, dry mouth. If you decide to augment CBT with medication, be consistent and be realistic.

3. Not dealing with everyday stress. Everyone experiences stress. But how you manage and respond to the stress in your life is up to you. Individuals with Skin Picking Disorder are often more sensitive than others to over-stimulation from their surroundings. Basic stress management practices can make a world of difference in helping you better manage your urges to pick your skin. Some simple stress management tips include:

- Maintain a healthy, balanced diet
- Don’t smoke
- Don’t drink to excess
- Don’t use recreational drugs
- Get regular exercise
- Get plenty of sleep
- Manage school and work so that you aren’t overwhelmed
- Take up meditation, or yoga, or some other form of relaxation
Stress management is imperative as a foundation to support you in stopping your skin picking. What are you doing to effectively manage your stress? What is one thing you could do today – right now – that would help you to manage your stress?

4. **Trying to stop skin picking without dealing with your feelings.** Lasting recovery takes into account healing on the emotional level. Not exploring and expressing your feelings often leads to picking as a distraction from feelings and as a substitute way to “get things out.” The result is that your skin gets worse, your picking continues, you reinforce that you can’t deal with your feelings because they’re overwhelming, and that picking your skin is the best way to deal with (that is, avoid dealing with) uncomfortable feelings. But, think about it: doesn’t picking inevitably lead you to feel worse afterwards? So, are there other ways to get your feelings out? Perhaps journaling, talking with a friend, joining a support group, or seeking the support of a professional therapist. Any (or all) of these things may make you think “ugh…no way”, but one way or another, you need to find a way to deal with your feelings that doesn’t involve picking at your skin.

5. **Letting perfectionism ruin your life.** Perfectionism generates anxiety and a sense of failure because it never lets you take credit for the good things you do (like resisting an urge to pick). Nothing you do is ever good enough to be “perfect”, and perfectionism is a setup for perpetual self-loathing and disappointment. But there are ways to
challenge the voice of perfectionism. First, notice it and what it is saying to you. Then, challenge the validity of those thoughts by asking yourself: “Is this always true? Would I hold anyone else to this standard of perfectionism? Is there perhaps a kinder and more realistic way to think about this?” Noticing and challenging your unrealistic and perfectionistic thoughts gives you the opportunity to choose to follow a self-supportive part of yourself instead.

6. **Giving up because you picked your skin again.** Skin pickers often tell me that they have “blown it” because they picked their skin after not picking for a day or more. But as I noted in #1 one above, slip-ups are a normal part of the process. It is critical to realize that there is a difference between a temporary “lapse” and a full scale “relapse”. And that difference is you. If you choose to over-focus on a recent lapse as evidence of your “failure”, or as proof that you don’t have what it takes to manage your skin picking, then you will be far more likely to throw in the towel. Focusing on a recent lapse leads people to see themselves as powerless, and to assume that they just can’t achieve the goals they have set for themselves. That type of thinking means you are over focusing on time spent picking and not giving yourself any credit for the all of the time not spent picking. If you can come to see that each time you don’t pick is a win, then you never lose.
7. **Worrying too much about what other people think.** You may worry that other people see your skin and judge you negatively because of it…*but that doesn’t mean that they actually are doing so.* Also, when you focus on what others think about you, you are making some fundamental cognitive mistakes that keep you feeling bad about yourself, for example:

- Most of the time, people are not spending nearly as much of time thinking about you as you think. Simply put, people are self-centered – they are focusing on their own lives, not on you.

- Even if they are thinking about you, they probably aren’t thinking about your skin. Most people have other things to worry about than your skin.

- They may actually be thinking positively about you and about your good characteristics. Is your skin really the most important thing about you? Is it not possible that others recognize aspects of your personality and character that are admirable and likeable?

- What other people think of you is really not important. What really matters is how you think about your self.

- What other people think is not something you can control, so why waste your energy in this unproductive way?
It is incredibly important to challenge the inner critical voice that mimics what we believe others are saying and thinking.

8. **Telling yourself “I can’t.”** There is no quicker way to disempower yourself than to say “I can’t”. Doing this creates the internal experiences of hopelessness and helplessness. How can you possibly expect to help yourself if you repeatedly tell yourself that you are incapable of doing so? If you’re going to tell yourself something, why not be nice to yourself (trust me – it’s okay to be nice to yourself) and say things like “I can,” or “I’m doing my best,” or “I am willing to accept that change is a process, and there are going to be bumps in the road – and maybe some on my skin.” I’m not talking about simplistic “positive thinking” here. I’m talking about speaking to yourself in a realistic manner about your life and your capabilities. There is no evidence that you can’t overcome skin picking, only that you haven’t done so yet. And there is plenty of evidence that people can move beyond skin picking.

9. **Not trying a specific treatment technique because “it didn’t work before.”** There are some very specific techniques that are a part of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which have been found to be effective tools in combatting Skin Picking Disorder. These techniques are by no means the only focus of treatment, but they can be a crucial part of learning to better manage your urges to pick. These techniques
fall under the general term Habit Reversal Training (HRT), and include the following:

- Keeping a log of your thoughts, feelings, and actions in picking situations
- Using “habit blockers” such as gloves in situations where you are likely to pick
- Using “competing responses” (i.e., something to occupy your hands) in high risk picking situations
- Removing tweezers and other picking implements from your home

You may have tried some of these techniques in the past with less than stellar results. But just because you didn’t get an immediate payoff before doesn’t mean that these techniques are useless. It may be best to conceptualize them as being like training wheels that you can temporarily use as you develop the more advanced long-term skills that will ultimately be most valuable in helping you to manage your skin picking. So if you’ve tried wearing gloves, keeping a log, covering your mirror or any other habit reversal technique before without seeing the results you wanted, it may be time to try it again - consistently, and within the larger framework of a treatment program that is designed to help you learn to tolerate your urges without capitulating to them.
10. **Deciding that – because you don’t personally know anyone who has stopped picking his or her skin – you won’t be able to do it.** Of course you don’t know anyone who has recovered from Skin Picking Disorder – almost without exception, people who suffer with this condition are embarrassed and ashamed of their behavior and the damage it causes. As a result, those who pick at their skin are highly unlikely to talk about it with friends and family. Simply put, this is one of the most hidden and misunderstood of all psychological conditions. Remember, Skin Picking Disorder wasn’t even recognized as a legitimate condition until May 2013. So, while role models are important, and you may not have one yet for skin picking, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t any. If you were to join our weekly therapy and support group for adults with skin picking and hair pulling, you would immediately meet people who have made tremendous recovery from skin picking. And even if you don’t know anyone else with Skin Picking Disorder, why not be the first person you know who has stopped picking, and then you can be a role model for someone else.

11. **Believing that if you accept yourself exactly as you are right now, then you won’t work to stop picking your skin.** Too many people – and this is especially true of individuals with Skin Picking Disorder – believe that they have to keep pushing themselves until “someday in the future” when they will be “good enough” to accept themselves. This is the belief that fuels the perfectionism we discussed in #5 above. But this belief that you must be perfect and that you must
keep pushing until you have proved you are worthy of self-acceptance is guaranteed to leave you feeling disappointed, unmotivated, and completely exhausted. Self-acceptance – right now, as you are – is the single most important step in your recovery from Skin Picking Disorder. That said, self-acceptance does not mean that there aren’t things you might like to change in your life. It means that you stop wasting your mental and emotional energy pushing and fighting against self-acceptance, thus freeing you to better use that energy for productive change in your life.

And finally…. 

12. **Using skin picking as an excuse to avoid having a great life right now.** One of the most common mental errors is to compare ourselves to others around us, and to then come to the completely unwarranted conclusion that everyone else has it so much better. But this is a complete fiction – everyone else doesn’t have it better than you, no matter how great his or her life seems to you. Everyone has issues, problems and challenges, and one of yours just happens to be skin picking. It’s not whether or not you have problems that makes for a meaningful and fulfilled life, but rather how you deal with them. Don’t put your life on hold until you finally stop picking your skin. You have a life today – live it!
Karen Pickett, MFT, is the Clinical Director of the OCD Center of Los Angeles and an expert in the treatment of Skin Picking Disorder. Karen appeared on A&E’s acclaimed TV series Obsessed as an expert therapist working with individuals with OCD and related conditions, including Skin Picking Disorder. She has also appeared on Dateline NBC, Discovery Health Channel, and in various magazines, radio shows and newspapers. Karen is a professional member of the International OCD Foundation (IOCDF), The Trichotillomania Learning Center, and the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science (ACBS).

Tom Corboy, MFT, is the Founder and Executive Director of the OCD Center of Los Angeles. Tom received his master's degree from the Department of Counseling Psychology at USC in 1993, where his graduate thesis was a study comparing various treatments of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Since then, much of his training and clinical experience has been focused on the treatment of OCD and related OC Spectrum Disorders, including Skin Picking Disorder. He is a member of the International Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation (IOCDF), the Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA), the Trichotillomania Learning Center (TLC), and American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (AAMFT).
The OCD Center of Los Angeles is a private outpatient clinic specializing in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for the treatment of OCD and related conditions, including Skin Picking Disorder. Since 1999, the center has treated hundreds of people with Skin Picking Disorder with individual therapy, as well as in our weekly therapy groups specifically for those with Skin Picking Disorder and Hair Pulling Disorder (Trichotillomania). We offer the following treatment options:

- Individual therapy
- Group therapy
- Intensive treatment
- Telephone therapy
- Online therapy
- Consultations

The OCD Center of Los Angeles has nine therapists on staff, all of whom are licensed or registered to practice in the State of California, and all of whom specialize in CBT for Skin Picking Disorder.

We treat adults, adolescents, and children, and offer services six days a week, including evenings and Saturdays. You can learn more about Skin Picking Disorder, our center, and our approach to treatment on our website at www.ocdla.com.

If you would like to further discuss treatment options available to you, please contact us by telephone at (310) 824-5200 (ext. 0), or click here to email us.