

# The psychological impact of HAIR LOSS

*Dr Maurice Collins explains why hair loss can cause anxiety and even depression.*

**H**alf of all men over the age of fifty are suffering from hair loss caused by androgenetic alopecia (pattern hair loss) and as many as two thirds of women experience hair loss at some point in their lives. Hair loss reduces self-esteem and self-confidence, and research has shown that it will usually cause some degree of anxiety and can even result in depression. This is because hair loss can cause a radical change in self-image. Hair loss has also been shown to cause a range of negative feelings including panic, denial, shame, desperation, obsession, jealousy and isolation. Research on pattern hair loss has shown that "hair is an essential part of a person's self-image and the consequences of androgenetic alopecia are predominantly psychological" (Sinclair, 2004).

## A great leveller

My own experience in dealing with patients of all ages, from all locations and walks of life has shown that hair loss is a great leveller. Patients seeking treatment for hair loss at my clinic appear to experience many of the same negative emotions. Therefore, in an effort to isolate data on the psychological impact of hair loss, we took a random sample of our patients who had completed a confidential questionnaire about how their hair loss made them feel. The results reflected and confirmed my impressions.

More than 50 per cent of the patients said their social lives and their self-confidence were negatively impacted by their hair loss. 90 per cent said that their hair loss gave them some degree of anxiety and 45 per cent said that their work life had been affected by their hair loss.

## Loss of youth?

One problem encountered in attempting to research the level of anxiety hair loss causes, particularly in men, is that they can be reluctant to admit the true extent of their feelings. This is due to a fear that admitting to a reduction in self-confidence or self-esteem, or an increase in anxiety, as a result of hair loss would be seen as vain and/or weak.

But hair loss is not a vanity issue, as many people assume. A drastic, negative change to the appearance can cause a seismic shift in how someone feels about themselves. This is better understood in women but the impact on men, particularly younger men, should not be underestimated. Hair loss makes one



PICTURED: Dr. Maurice Collins

look older and is often perceived to signal the end of youth, vitality and desirability. If the sufferer is, as often happens, a single man in his twenties or thirties it is clear that this will cause some degree of anxiety, even trauma.

Historically, hair has always been associated in men with youth and virility, and in women with beauty and health. In men, the loss of the hairline changes the appearance of the face by shifting the balance of the forehead, which results in an aged appearance. Hair is an important determinant of physical attractiveness and hair loss therefore affects an individual's perception of their own looks.

## Treating hair loss

The physical manifestation of androgenetic alopecia in men is caused by the action of the hormone Dihydrotestosterone (DHT) on the hair follicles of those who are genetically predisposed to it. This is usually characterised by recession on the temples and hairline, and thinning in the crown. In women, the cause of pattern hair loss is unknown and the patterns of hair loss differ. There are two FDA-approved medical treatments for hair loss: Finasteride, a prescription oral medicine (for men only) and Minoxidil, a topical, over the counter medicine. These two medications, used concomitantly, are often the first step for younger men who want to prolong the life of the hair they still have. Hair transplant surgery is a permanent solution for those who have sufficient, good quality donor hair and realistic expectations. A linear strip of hair-bearing skin is taken from the back of the head, where the hair is immune to the hair loss process. This strip is then divided using stereoscopic microscopes into its individual hair follicles, which are then transplanted into the areas of the head where hair has been lost. This hair will then grow in its new location for the rest of the patient's life.

The selection of the appropriate treatment for the patient, be it medical or surgical (or both), should only be made after attempting to ascertain the psychological impact that hair loss has had on them and to realistically manage their expectations of what is possible.

The effective treatment of hair loss must therefore be holistic in nature. It is crucial to address both the psychological and physical manifestations of hair loss and to appreciate that the patient's self-image issues are just as important as restoring their hair.