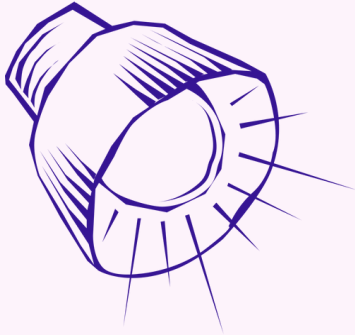




Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



The Unseen Battles: Illuminating the Hidden Struggles



Personal stories of students at Trinity
who share their experiences of coping
with Unseen Battles.

Introduction



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In the vast tapestry of human experience, there are stories that remain hidden, battles fought in silence. While some scars are visible, others lie beneath the surface, equally painful yet unseen. This booklet is an empathetic exploration, a candle in the darkness, to illuminate those struggles that often go unnoticed.

Our purpose is to foster understanding, empathy, and hope. Through the stories of individuals who courageously navigate the labyrinth of invisible challenges, we aim to shed light on the broader issues that affect countless lives.

We strive to confront the misconceptions and stereotypes that shroud these challenges and, in doing so, offer potential solutions and pathways to support.

These stories are not just individual accounts; they are windows into a collective experience. They remind us that behind every outwardly serene face may lie a profound struggle. In sharing these narratives, we hope to bridge the gap between those who silently suffer and those who may not fully comprehend the weight of their burdens.

Compelling stories can amplify the lived experiences and achievements of underrepresented voices in ways that build a more profound sense of connection between us.

Ultimately, this booklet serves as a testament to resilience, a celebration of the human spirit's capacity to overcome adversity, and an invitation to stand in solidarity with those who bear invisible scars. May it inspire compassion, spark conversations, and pave the way for a more inclusive and understanding world.

AUTHOR

Declan Treanor

Dear Readers,

As you delve into these stories, we invite you to approach them with empathy and an open heart. Students from Trinity College Dublin have bravely shared their unseen battles, shedding light on struggles that often remain in the shadows.

These narratives are a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. While some content may be distressing, we hope these stories inspire understanding, compassion, and a broader awareness of the battles that many silently endure.

Warm regards,

Declan Treanor
disAbility Service Director
Trinity disAbility Service



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Liam's Journey with Trichotillomania

From the outside looking in, Liam always appeared as the embodiment of calm and control. His peers often envied his ability to glide through academic challenges seemingly without a hint of stress. However, hidden beneath his composure and his carefully styled hair were patches of bare skin - a testament to the turmoil that brewed inside him.

Liam's tryst with trichotillomania began during his Junior Freshman year, a time when the weight of expectations and the looming fears of adulthood began to mount.

Each strand of hair he pulled out felt like a tiny release, a brief moment of relief from the overwhelming pressure and anxiety.

It became his secret coping mechanism, a way to deal with the external stresses and the internal dialogues that often questioned his worthiness and capabilities.

The more Liam gave in to his urges, the more noticeable the patches became. He found himself strategically styling his hair to conceal the growing bald spots. Lectures became a source of intense anxiety. Every time he felt the urge to pull at his hair, he would look around nervously, wondering if someone had caught him in the act. Social situations, which he once thrived in, became a minefield. He'd shy away from any activity that might expose his secret, from swimming to simply hanging out in well-lit areas with friends.

But with each session of hair-pulling came a subsequent wave of shame and guilt. Why couldn't he control it? Why did he have to mar his appearance this way? Would people understand, or would they simply judge and ostracise him? Why couldn't other see him do this?

It wasn't until a close friend noticed and gently broached the topic that Liam realised he wasn't alone. Many, he learned, grappled with their unique challenges, and it was okay to seek help.

Through therapy, Liam began to understand the roots of his compulsions. The safe space provided by his therapist, combined with the support of a community of individuals with similar experiences, enabled him to learn techniques to redirect his urges. More importantly, he started his journey towards self-acceptance, understanding that his worth was not tied to his compulsion and that he was more than his trichotillomania.

As Liam attended therapy sessions with others who were also on their own paths to healing, he couldn't help but wonder if they too had hidden battles like his own. Amidst their collective journey to confront inner demons, he observed how the most obvious signs often went unnoticed. It struck him that everyone had their struggles, their silent battles fought behind closed doors and masked by their everyday façades.

Over time, as Liam shared his experiences and listened to the stories of his fellow group members, a profound sense of empathy washed over him. He discovered that his compulsion was not a mark of weakness, but rather a manifestation of the stress and anxiety that many silently endured. In the safety of the therapy room, judgment was replaced with understanding, and isolation gave way to connection.

Together, they learned to cope and heal, not just from their compulsions but also from the emotional scars that accompanied them. Liam found solace in the knowledge that he was not alone, and that there was a community of individuals who could relate to his journey. With each therapy session, he moved one step closer to self-acceptance, gradually shedding the weight of shame that had burdened him for so long.

Trichotillomania. What is it?

Also known as hair-pulling disorder, is a mental health condition characterised by a compulsive urge to pull out one's own hair, leading to noticeable hair loss, distress, and social or functional impairment. It can affect individuals of any age.



Ava's Battle Against Dermatillomania

Ava's fingers danced gracefully over the canvas, effortlessly moulding the strokes that became her art. For her, art was more than a passion; it was an escape, a place where she felt free. But, like the duality of light and shadow in her paintings, Ava's hands were both her saviours and captors. The same fingers that could craft beautiful landscapes bore scars from her relentless skin-picking, a silent testament to her battles with dermatillomania.

The college experience brought with it a myriad of emotions for Ava. The highs of newfound friendships and the lows of academic pressures often saw her seeking refuge in her old habit. Every slight imperfection on her skin became a target, every anxious thought a trigger.

Study sessions turned into hours lost in a trance-like state, her fingers mindlessly picking away at perceived blemishes.

Class presentations were her worst nightmare. The fear of judgment was paralysing. Ava worried that her classmates would notice her scars, whispering behind her back. She started wearing long sleeves and copious amounts of concealer, regardless of the weather. Avoiding group projects or any scenario where her skin might become the subject of focus became her *modus operandi*.

But, college was also where Ava found her turning point. One day, in a psychology class, the topic of discussion was OCD and related disorders. As the professor detailed the symptoms of dermatillomania, Ava felt seen, realising that she wasn't alone in her struggle.

She began attending therapy, where cognitive-behavioural techniques taught her to recognise and intercept the urge to pick. One of the most transformative solutions came when her therapist suggested integrating her compulsion with her love for art. Every time Ava felt the itch to pick, she'd channel that energy into sketching. Initially, her sketches were chaotic, filled with raw emotion.

But over time, as she learned to manage her compulsions, her drawings evolved, turning her pain and anxiety into beautiful works of art.

Ava also began attending support groups, where she met others who understood her struggles. Together, they shared coping strategies and words of encouragement, slowly breaking the chains of their shared compulsion. For Ava, understanding her triggers, seeking support, and redirecting her urges towards art became the roadmap to recovery.

Dermatillomania. What is it?

A mental health condition where a person compulsively picks or scratches their skin, causing injuries or scarring. Also known as excoriation disorder or skin-picking disorder, this condition falls under the category of obsessive-compulsive disorders (OCDs).



Ethan's Unseen Fight against Self-Biting and Hitting

Ethan's fingers danced effortlessly over the keys of his piano, creating harmonies that resonated deeply with anyone who heard. His gift was undeniable, but those same hands, capable of producing such beauty, also bore the brunt of his internal battles.

It started subtly, a nibble on the edge of his thumb during an intense study session or a light slap on his thigh when he felt overwhelmed. But as the pressures of college life at Trinity College Dublin and his rigorous musical training intensified, so did the severity of Ethan's self-inflicting behaviours. It was as if the emotional crescendo inside him demanded a physical outlet, manifesting in biting his hands or hitting himself, mostly hidden from prying eyes.

His friends began to notice the signs – the red marks on his hands, the occasional wince when someone gave him an enthusiastic pat on the back, or the sudden jerky movements when he thought no one was looking. But it was during a particularly challenging musical piece, in a room filled with the hush of anticipation, that his secret was inadvertently exposed. Missing a note, frustration bubbled inside him, culminating in a visible bite on his hand. The room's silence was palpable.

Among the audience was Professor Martin, a veteran musician with a keen eye for both talent and trouble. Recognising the signs of Ethan's distress, he approached him after the performance, offering both understanding and a potential solution.

Drawing from his own experiences, Professor Martin introduced Ethan to drumming. It was a way to channel the pent-up energy and frustration that often led to his self-inflicting behaviours. The rhythmic beats, the sensation of the drumsticks in his hands, and the powerful resonance of the drum became a therapeutic outlet. With each beat, Ethan could express his emotions, releasing the negativity in a controlled and creative manner.

Alongside drumming, Ethan sought counselling at the Trinity's Student Counselling Service. Through therapy, he explored the deep-seated reasons for his urges, working to address the root causes of his stress and anxiety. The counsellor equipped him with coping strategies, including deep-breathing exercises, grounding techniques, and even recommended joining a drum circle, where Ethan could share his passion and emotions with others who understood the healing power of music.

Ethan's journey wasn't linear, and there were days when the old habits threatened to resurface. But with the support of his loved ones, the guidance from Professor Martin, and his newfound love for drumming, he started rewriting his story. His melodies still touched souls, but now they also echoed his personal triumphs and resilience.

Self-Biting and Hitting. What is it?

Self-injurious behaviours (SIBs). These are behaviours that an individual engages in that may cause physical harm, such as head banging, or self-biting.



Shining Through Shadows:

Lucy's Journey to Overcome OCD and MentalHealth Challenges

Lucy had always been an exceptional student, known for her intelligence and dedication. As a third-year engineering student at Trinity, she had set her sights on a brilliant future in the field. However, her journey was marred by unexpected challenges that she never saw coming.

The arrival of COVID-19 turned Lucy's world upside down. Suddenly, her regular routine of attending lectures, participating in study groups, and engaging in campus activities was disrupted. The transition to remote learning was particularly hard on her. With each passing day, she found it increasingly difficult to leave her house.

Lucy had always been meticulous about her surroundings, but her tendencies took a darker turn during the pandemic. She developed Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which manifested itself in a need to ensure that everything in her house was in perfect order before leaving for class. This ritual included going around the house multiple times to check if all lights and switches were off, doors were locked, and windows were closed. It was an exhausting process that could take up to 40 minutes to complete.

As a result of her OCD, Lucy was always late for her lectures. Her professors noticed her frequent absences and tardiness, and her classmates began to express concern. Lucy's struggle extended beyond her rituals; her perfectionism seeped into her schoolwork. She spent hours rechecking her assignments, making sure everything was flawless. This led to missed deadlines and sleepless nights.

Realising that she couldn't continue down this path, Lucy decided to seek help. She reached out to Trinity Counseling Services, where she was connected with a Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) therapist who specialised in treating OCD. With the therapist's guidance, Lucy started to understand the nature of her condition better and learned strategies to manage her compulsions.

The therapy sessions provided a safe space for Lucy to discuss her challenges and fears openly. Additionally, Lucy met with an Occupational Therapist (OT) who helped her develop a personalised plan to improve her daily functioning. They worked on strategies to reduce the time-consuming rituals and make her daily routine more efficient.

Over time, Lucy's hard work and determination began to pay off. Her therapist helped her reframe her thoughts and challenged the irrational beliefs that fueled her OCD. With practice, she was able to reduce the time spent on her rituals and slowly regain control over her life. She also learned how to cope with the anxiety that came with her perfectionism, allowing her to meet her deadlines and excel in her coursework.

However, Lucy faced another hurdle on her path to recovery. She struggled with moving forward on tasks and avoided using to-do lists because she fixated on perfectionism and completing the lists. Her therapist recommended that she consider going back on medication to help manage her symptoms. However, Lucy's family was against this idea, fearing potential side effects. Despite her progress with therapy, Lucy was still unable to keep up with her coursework.

She repeatedly went over previous weeks of notes, unable to move forward. Recognising this, her therapist and OT worked together to find a balanced approach. They suggested exploring alternative medication options with fewer side effects, seeking a second medical opinion, or adjusting her therapy to address this specific issue.

Lucy continued to be in external care, but the ongoing support and understanding of her therapists, family, and university community allowed her to persevere. Her story remained a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the importance of seeking help and exploring multiple avenues of support when faced with complex mental health challenges.

OCD. What is it?

In obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), a person is troubled by intrusive, distressing thoughts (obsessions) and feels the pressure to carry out repetitive behaviors (compulsions). Sometimes people with OCD manage their obsessions without giving any external sign that they are suffering. Usually, however, they try to relieve their obsessions by performing some type of compulsion: a repeated behavior or mental action that is aimed at soothing the fears.



Harmonising with Challenges: Cillian's Melodic Journey Beyond Nail Biting

Among the students at Trinity College Dublin there was Cillian, a passionate music enthusiast. He had an undeniable talent for composing beautiful melodies and creating harmonious tunes that could touch the soul. But, like Liam and others, Cillian had his own battle, one that was manifested through a seemingly harmless habit - nail-biting.

For as long as he could remember, Cillian had been biting his nails, especially during moments of stress and anxiety. It was a subconscious act, one that he did without realising, as his mind raced with musical notes and compositions.

The more he delved into his studies of music, the more intense the nail-biting became. It was as if the melodies in his head were so powerful that they needed an outlet, even if it meant taking a toll on his fingers.

Over time, his nails became ragged, and his fingertips bore the marks of his compulsion. It was a struggle that he kept hidden, much like Liam had hidden his trichotillomania. He didn't want others to see his fingers and think less of him, especially in a field as competitive as music.

One day, as Cillian sat in a practice room, lost in thought and biting his nails absentmindedly, a fellow music student named Ella walked in. Ella was known for her keen eye and her empathetic nature. She had observed Cillian's nail-biting habit before but had never brought it up. This time, however, she decided to gently broach the topic.

"Cillian," Ella began, "I've noticed that you've been biting your nails quite a bit lately. Is everything okay?"

Cillian was taken aback by her directness but also relieved that someone had noticed and cared enough to ask. He hesitated for a moment, then decided to open up.

"Honestly, Ella, it's a nervous habit. I do it when I'm stressed or anxious, especially when I'm working on my music."

Ella nodded understandingly. "I can imagine how the pressure in our program can get to all of us. But, Cillian, your talent is undeniable, and your music is inspiring. You don't need to resort to nail-biting to cope with stress. There are healthier ways to manage it."

Cillian appreciated Ella's support and concern. With her encouragement, he began seeking healthier outlets for his stress. He started practicing mindfulness techniques, like deep breathing, and even joined a music therapy group to explore new ways of channeling his emotions.

As time passed, Cillian's nail-biting habit gradually diminished. He realised that he didn't have to harm himself to create beautiful music. His compositions became even more heartfelt, reflecting the emotional journey he had embarked on to overcome his compulsion.

Cillian's story served as a reminder that even in the pursuit of passion and talent, it was essential to prioritise self-care and seek support when needed.

Nail-Biting. What is it?

Onychophagia, or onychophagy, is considered a pathological oral habit and grooming disorder characterised by chronic, seemingly uncontrollable nail-biting.



Melinda: A Tapestry of Hope

Melinda, with her cascade of long auburn hair and freckles, was unlike any other student at Trinity College Dublin. The campus whispered with tales of literature from old and new, from Samuel Beckett to Sally Rooney, but Melinda's story was woven with threads of pain and resilience, tinted by her unique perspective.

The scars on her arms bore witness to a past overshadowed by bullying and personal struggles. But these scars were now a testament, not of pain, but of her survival and the promise of brighter days. Melinda had a gift – an innate ability to see the world in vivid colours and patterns. This ability, fueled by her autistic perspective, gave her a unique voice in her designs.

She would often lose herself in her room, stitching stories into fabric, creating outfits that spoke of the tales trapped in her heart.

Every day after lectures, she would find solace in a hidden nook of the campus, her sketchbook sprawled out, the strokes of her pencil capturing the musings of her soul. There, her best friend, a stray cat she lovingly named "Keats", would keep her company. The purrs and gentle nudges from Keats were a reminder of the unconditional love she found amidst the chaos of her life.

Registering with the Trinity disAbility Service was a milestone for her. Through them, she met Dr. Eliza, a compassionate counselor from the Student Counselling Service. Dr. Eliza, with her gentle nature, became Melinda's beacon, guiding her through the stormy waters of academia and personal growth.

As weeks turned to months, Melinda's designs caught the eye of the university's art and fashion community. From mere doodles in her sketchbook, they transformed into breathtaking ensembles showcased in the Trinity Ability co_op annual Disability Art exhibition. The crowd marveled not just at her talent but at the depth of emotion each piece conveyed.

One evening, as the sun painted the sky with hues of orange and purple, Melinda stood by the window of her room, Keats purring by her side. She traced her scars, thinking of her journey - from the shadows of her past to the luminescence of her present. And as the first star twinkled that night, Melinda whispered a promise to herself, "I am a tapestry of hope, and my story is far from over."

Self-Harm. What is it?

Self-harm, also known as self-injury or self-mutilation, is a behaviour in which an individual intentionally inflicts physical harm on themselves, often as a coping mechanism for emotional distress or psychological pain. It can manifest in various forms, such as cutting, burning, scratching, or hitting oneself.



Conclusion: Voices from the Halls of Trinity College Dublin

Behind the historic walls and vibrant student life of Trinity College Dublin lay a myriad of untold stories. The tales shared within this booklet, while anonymised, are inspired by real students I have had the privilege to meet. Liam, Ava, Ethan, Lucy, Cillian, and Melinda symbolise countless others who grapple silently with their unique challenges, often just beyond our awareness. Understanding is the cornerstone of empathy. As we delve deeper into these narratives, a profound realisation dawns - these struggles are closer to home than we often acknowledge. In the bustling corridors, study halls, and lecture theatres, many carry with them invisible burdens, confronting them with a courage that often goes unnoticed.

It's imperative that we, as a community, amplify our efforts to foster an environment of understanding and support. By shedding light on these stories, we aim to underscore the importance of acknowledging the realities that many of our peers face daily. The resilience they exhibit is testament to the human spirit's strength and adaptability, but it's also a call to action for all of us.

Let's endeavour to be more observant, to listen actively, and to extend a helping hand when needed. After all, it is only by recognising and embracing these tales of tenacity and triumph that we can truly build a compassionate and inclusive Trinity College Dublin.

Students from Trinity College Dublin, like many others worldwide, may grapple with unseen struggles including behaviours like nail-biting, Trichotillomania, OCD, and self-harm. These behaviours can often be manifestations of underlying stress, anxiety, or other emotional challenges.

It's essential for educational institutions and communities to recognise and provide support for these challenges to promote the well-being of all students.



Trinity Student Supports & Services

Your mental health and emotional well-being is important. We want to remind you to take care of yourself. You are not alone as you deal with problems affecting your health and wellness.

Trinity College Dublin has great resources to offer to ensure you are able to meet your needs.

The Trinity disAbility Service is here to help support and direct you to the correct resources. If you don't know where to begin or need to talk to someone familiar, you are always welcome to come talk with a **Trinity Disability Officer** or email askds@tcd.ie

Scan the QR code for
all Trinity Supports
& Services ➡





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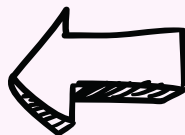


Trinity disAbility Service Drop-in:

Monday - Friday

12pm - 2pm.

Scan the QR code below
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