

About Chronic Cheek Biting

by Matthew Traube, MFT, Licensed Clinical Psychotherapist

Chronic cheek biting (morsicatio buccarum) is a compulsive behavior that causes an individual to repeatedly bite the inside of the cheek. Akin to skin picking (excoriation) and hair pulling (trichotillomania), chronic cheek biting is classified as a body-focused repetitive behavior (BFRB). Chronic cheek biting can be found in the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) under the heading Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders.

Often referred to as "cheek chewing," chronic cheek biting can result in a myriad of complications.

Redness, painful sores, and tears can occur in the mucosa, which is the inner lining of the mouth. For some, after repetitive biting occurs, the lining of the cheek can start to feel irregular, increasing the urge to continue to bite in order to create a smooth surface. Psychologically, feelings of guilt, shame, and hopelessness may arise. Social activity can decrease in order to prevent others from observing the behavior.

As with other BFRBs, the roots of chronic cheek biting seem to be multifactorial. The behavior is more common for people who experience higher levels of stress and anxiety. Some people are compelled by the need for a smooth feeling of the inner cheek lining. Any perceived impurity such as a bump or scratch may produce the uncontrollable urge to remove the imperfection by biting the area. Other people can be unaware when they begin biting, experiencing a trance-like state. Eventually, they become conscious and aware of the damage they have caused to their inner cheek.

While cheek biting is less studied than other BFRBs, it is thought to share a similar complex etiology. **It is likely that biologic predisposition, acting through genetic mechanisms, activates the repetitive behavior.** This process may be initiated or influenced by emotional states, and can itself cause an emotional feedback loop that results in the recurring behavior. Because chronic cheek biting has both behavioral and emotional components, treatment should focus on both aspects. Similar to the case with other BFRBs, managing the behavior is very difficult if you are unaware you are doing it or in a trance-like state.

A simple two-step management approach can be helpful for many people who feel overwhelmed by the issue.

First, ensure the behavior is consciously observed. Second, work on strategies to change the behavior. The trick is to train yourself to notice the anticipatory signals that you are about to bite your cheek. This can be as simple as thinking to yourself, "I feel like I might bite my cheek," or "I am biting my cheek." Another strategy is to keep track of the behavior by journaling when the behavior occurs. Think about whether the behavior was triggered by an event, and what feelings were associated with it. By labeling the behavior and the emotions associated with it, we can move the behavior into our consciousness and increase our chances of regulating it. For an in-depth overview of treatment guidelines and considerations for BFRBs, download our free booklet, [Expert Consensus Treatment Guidelines](#).

Because the act of cheek biting can create a soothing sensation, **one strategy to change the behavior is to replace it with a healthier one** that provides a similar soothing feeling. Sometimes this can be as simple as chewing gum as a replacement behavior. Other times breathing or relaxation exercises, imagery, and hypnosis can be useful. For example, breathing can be an effective tool to help quiet the mind and relax the body instead of relying on cheek biting to achieve a feeling of calm well-being. The simple practice of breathing in and out at a comfortable rate with attention focused on your breath can override the urge to bite. If your mind wanders to everyday concerns and the urge to bite, focus on slowly bringing your attention back to your breath entering and exiting your body until the urge decreases.

Behavioral approaches such as breath work or relaxation exercises can provide significant relief.

However, there are often emotional motivations that exist beneath the surface, fueling the behavior, which must be considered as part of your strategy. Think back to when the behavior first happened and ask yourself, what was your life like? Can you remember feeling happy, sad, upset or anxious?

Consider whether the behavior protects you in some way. It may prevent you from having to face uncomfortable social experiences or be an effective way to avoid succeeding in certain aspects of life. For example, you may tell yourself, "I wanted to go on the date, but once they found out about my behavior, it never would have worked," as a way to protect yourself preemptively from social rejection. Cheek biting can also be used as a coping mechanism to relieve emotional pain, physical pain or a blend of the two. Understanding the meaning behind the pain can be useful.

Finally, receiving emotional support is an important part of your strategy.

It can make the difference between success and failure. Interacting with individuals who have experienced similar symptoms or a therapist who can provide coaching, insights, and emotional support are all very useful. Human connection can be a very powerful tool.

Chronic cheek biting, similar in nature to other BFRBs such as excoriation and trichotillomania, can cause significant distress. The most successful management strategies make use of a variety of therapeutic techniques that address actionable emotional and behavioral components. **While learning how to manage the behavior, it is important to remember that emotional discomfort that influences the behavior is subjective rather than objective.** This realization empowers you to choose how you experience these emotions and enables you to alter your behavior.

Matt is a Licensed Clinical Psychotherapist located in Santa Barbara, CA. He offers cognitive behavioral therapy, habit reversal training, and psychodynamic therapy for teens and adults who experience skin picking, hair pulling, anxiety, and image issues. When treating skin picking and hair pulling, it is important to recognize that it can be both a behavioral problem and an emotional problem and to treat both. Receiving emotional support and tools to manage the behavior can make the difference. www.matthewtraube.com