

Why do I bite my nails? by Ann Gadd

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You've bitten your nails for ages. You know it's unsightly, you've tried every remedy available, but still, when you get stressed you nibble away.

Every habit we do has an emotional cause. When we find ourselves in a situation where those emotional buttons are pressed, we start acting out our habit. Each of us has different issues and so our way of responding to stress is mirrored in a variety of different habits. Understanding why we do what we do, gives us insight into our emotional make-up.

WHY DO WE DO THEM?

Even though we know our habits are harmful, when we do them they do bring about some feeling of relief, so we are more inclined to repeat them. Stress levels have increased 45% in the last 30 years according to a study by psychologist Richard Rahe in the UK and, he says they keep increasing. Consequently we are more likely to have more harmful habits than our grandfathers.

WHY HABITS ARE HARD TO STOP

Because they dissipate nervous energy, we feel more relaxed doing them so we repeat them to achieve this short-term sense of well-being. You may feel guilty afterwards, which will increase your stress level and drive you to repeat your habit again. It's a vicious circle and hard to stop no matter how many times you tell yourself to stop. It's a short term gain for long term pain. Some habits, like nicotine and alcohol not only create an emotional, but also physical relief.

WHAT WOULD THE ISSUE BE THEN NAIL-BITING?

Many women are brought up to believe that nice girls don't get angry. We can cry, be afraid, but shouting like the proverbial fish-wife, just didn't cut it for many of us. Temper tantrums were severely dealt with and nice girls smiled and said everything was just peachy fine, (when inside they longed to claw the eyes out of anyone who

stood in the way of their desires). In a society where aggression is considered to be unacceptable, aggressive desires are suppressed. It's just not on to claw the boss's face when you get overlooked for promotion. (You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours however, works!)

In primal times, nails not only protected our fingers and toes but were a useful fighting tool. Now we talk of our nails symbolically as weapons, such as "getting our claws into someone" referring to your ex best friend who has just let it drop that she has aggressively moved in on your man. Or we say she has "clawed her way to the top" implying that she used whatever threatening/seductive/manipulative skill she could muster to surpass the rest of us, which leaves us "spitting nails."

Red is the common colour used for nail-polish. Red represents anger and sexuality. As in *seeing red*, a *red flag* to a bull or a *red-light* district. Women with long red nails are viewed as "femme fatales". But the long red nails also convey the message: "We're not afraid to use aggression to achieve our ends."

When we bite our nails, we do not want to draw attention to them by painting them red. As we have been taught it's not "nice" for girls to give voice to our anger, we internalize it. I can't tell you how many women tell me that "well yes they may be mildly irritated," when their feet (from Footology) and every other aspect of themselves, shows that they are really fuming mad – even if they are not fully conscious of just how angry they are. Consequently we bite off the very weapons we instinctually want to use to attack. We disarm ourselves and in so doing internalize our anger.

This impacts on us further, as unable to express ourselves honestly, our self-esteem diminishes. We are afraid of revealing the true nature of ourselves in case it offends and this fear eats away at us (as do we). We become fearful and nervous when emotions arise that we feel others would find unacceptable, in case we lose control. In suppressing our real self, we also create internal conflict and anger at not being able to be our authentic selves for to be self means not being approved of. Ask yourself when the urge arises to bite, who it is that you really want to claw at?

CHILDREN WHO BITE THEIR NAILS

"Yes," some people say, "but my five year old bites his/her nails, and I don't think they are repressing anger." In any family what is suppressed, is often expressed by

more sensitive children or animals. (I've known a parent, cat and child in the family all on the same homeopathic medication for illness and it worked on all three – the unexpressed dis-ease of the adult was manifesting in the cat and child as well). So the child may be picking up suppressed anger from one or both parents or may also be containing how he/she feels as this is learnt behaviour from the parents and a way to keep in favour.

HOW DO I STOP?

One of the success stories I have heard was that of a trainee nurse who, when she started having to dress wounds, change bed-pans etc, stopped biting her nails. The thought of what her nails had been touching, was sufficient motivation to curb the need to bite!

Most of us will need to examine areas of our lives where we are suppressing our anger and resentment, as opposed to expressing it. That's not to say that we need to start yelling at everyone who vaguely crosses our path, but we do need to a) become aware that we are angry b) find an appropriate way to express it. Often examining the real emotion behind the anger can cause it to dissipate. So you're angry because your friend shows up late (again) for an outing. If you examine your anger, you may find that the real cause is more about your feeling of inadequacy, i.e. your friend not treating you respectfully which makes you fearful of your own self-worth, than anger. So you feel inadequate/fearful and respond in anger.

Do you say "it's fine," when it isn't, and then brood about the situation for hours afterwards? Perhaps its time to verbalise your true feelings, such as "I really think that before you look for a manager externally you consider me for the position," instead of fuming when someone with half your credentials, gets employed in a senior position. Even if you only take small steps to verbalise your feelings, before you reach explosive levels, you will help alleviate the stress that makes you want to bite.