

Self Harm

In recent years, there has been growing media coverage of self-injurious behavior (SIB), otherwise known as cutting. It may involve a variety of behaviors, but is described as the mutilation of a body part without the intent to commit suicide. Although the media coverage is recent, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, about 1% of the population engages in SIB. Despite the coverage, it is a phenomenon that is misunderstood.

Although males self-injure as well, a majority of self-injurers are female. They often share the following characteristics:

- Between the ages of 13 and 30
- Fear of change
- Tend to have difficulties with impulse control, which may present in substance abuse and/or eating disorders
- Tend to have difficulty maintaining and sustaining meaningful relationships
- May be unable or unwilling to properly care for their own needs
- Decreased self-esteem and an increased need for acceptance from others
- May have a childhood history of trauma
- Inflexible thinking/perfectionism

Methods of SIB:

- Cutting/scratching
- Burning
- Self-Hitting
- Interference with wound healing
- Head banging
- Hair pulling
- Biting
- More severe methods (bone breaking, eye enucleation (removal), amputation of body parts, ingestion of sharp or toxic objects)
- Approximately 75% of self-injurers use more than one method.

Why would someone intentionally harm him/herself?

- To relieve intense feelings
- To manage emotions that are too painful to express
- To escape numbness and emptiness
- They feel physical pain is easier to cope with than emotional pain
- Self-punishment
- To maintain control of emotions and/or one's body
- To obtain or maintain influence over the behavior of others
- To prevent something worse from happening

*****Even though SIB leads to pain, scarring, and worse, persons who self-injure continue the behavior because they are often left with a release of tension after the behavior. The self-injurer will continue until alternate ways of coping are developed.

Ways to overcome the urge to self-injure (adapted from mirror-mirror.org/selfinj.htm):

- Deep or diaphragmatic breathing
- Phoning or visiting a therapist, friend, or crisis line
- Relaxation exercises
- Exert energy (via exercise, activities, or chores)
- Hold ice in your hand
- Journaling
- Holding a favorite stuffed animal
- Squeezing a stress ball
- Drawing on yourself with red marker
- Use the object of self-injury on an inanimate object
- Positive self-talk reminding yourself that you are special and deserve love and respect

Ways to help a friend who self-injures

- Don't ignore the problem
- Be supportive
- Be available
- Suggest they seek help
- Realize that you are NOT responsible for the behavior of others

*****If you do self-injure, realize that you are not alone, but that you do need help. Although persons who engage in SIB do not intend to kill themselves, such tragedy does result. Please seek help to learn more effective ways of coping. For more information, you may visit our website at www.fit.edu/caps.

Information was gathered using Bodily Harm by K. Conterio and Wendy Lader, Ph.D., www.geocities.com/HotSprings/1872/safety.html, www.shpm.com/articles/depress/violence.html, and mirror-mirror.org/selfinj.html.