

Self-Injury



Definition

Self-injury, which is also known as self-harm or self-mutilation, is defined as any intentional injury to one's own body. It usually either leaves marks or causes tissue damage.

Self-injury usually indicates that somewhere during development that person didn't learn good ways of coping with overwhelming feelings or stress.

People who "self-injure" are not usually suicidal. They do, however, intentionally inflict injuries upon themselves, usually in response to stress or trauma.

Statistics

The majority of people who self-injure are women between the ages of 13 and 30. However, there are "cutters" of every age, gender, and economic group. Other common factors of self-injury include:

- There was a major change in the teen's life—parents divorce or death
- There is a history of family violence, abuse, or sexual abuse
- Intense feelings of fear, hurt, anger, rejection, or abandonment
- Feelings of loss and/or need for control

What are the types of self-injury?

The most common ways that people self-injure include:

- Cutting
- Burning (or "branding" with hot objects)
- Picking at skin or re-opening wounds
- Hair-pulling
- Hitting (with hammer or other object)
- Bond-breaking
- Head-banging (more often seen in autistic, severely retarded, or psychotic people)
- Multiple piercing or multiple tattooing may be a kind of self-injury, especially if pain or stress relief is a factor

Most self-injuring adolescents act alone, not in groups, and hide their behavior. There are also some more extreme types of self-mutilation, such as castration or amputation, which are rare and are associated with psychosis.

Who engages in self-injury?

Although there is no simple portrait of a person who intentionally injures him/herself, there are some commonly seen factors:

- Self-injury more commonly occurs in adolescent females.
- Many self-injurers have a history of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
- Many self-injurers have co-existing problems of substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder (or compulsive alone), or eating disorders.

- Self-injuring individuals were often raised in families that discouraged expression of anger, and tend to lack skills to express their emotions.
- Self-injurers often lack a good social support network.

How does self-injury become addictive?

A person who becomes a habitual self-injurer usually follows a common progression:

- The first incident may occur by accident, or after seeing or hearing of others who engage in self-injury
- The person has strong feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety, or dread before an injuring event
- These feelings build, and the person has no way to express or address them directly
- Cutting or other self-injury provides a sense of relief, a release of the mounting tension
- A feeling of guilt and shame usually follows the event
- The person hides the tools used to injure, and covers up the evidence, often by wearing long sleeves
- The next time a similar strong feeling arises, the person has been “conditioned” to seek relief in the same way
- The feelings of shame periodically led to continued self-injurious behavior
- The person feels compelled to repeat self-harm, which is likely to increase in frequency and degree

Why do people engage in self-injury?

Teens who have difficulty talking about their feelings may show their emotional tension, physical discomfort, pain, and low self-esteem with self-injurious behaviors. Although they may feel like the “steam” in the “pressure cooker” has been released following the act of hurting themselves, teenagers may also feel hurt, anger, fear, and hate. The reasons self-injurers give for this behavior vary:

- Self-injury temporarily relieves intense feelings, pressure, or anxiety
- Self-injury provides a sense of being real, being alive—of feeling something
- Injuring oneself is a way to externalize emotional internal pain—to feel pain on the outside instead of the inside
- Self-injury is a way to control and manage pain—unlike the pain experienced through physical or sexual abuse
- Self-injury is a way to break emotional numbness (the self-anesthesia that allows someone to cut without feeling pain)
- Self-abuse is self-soothing behavior for someone who does not have other means of calm intense emotions
- Self-loathing—some self-injurers are punishing themselves for having strong feelings (which they were usually not allowed to express as children), or for a sense that somehow they are bad and undeserving (an outgrowth of abuse and a belief that it was deserved)
- Self-injury followed by tending to wounds is a way to express self-care, to be self-nurturing, for someone who never learned how to do that in a more direct way
- Harming oneself can be a way to draw attention to the need for help, to ask for assistance in an indirect way
- Sometimes self-injury is an attempt to affect others—to manipulate them, make them feel guilty or bad, make them care, or make them go away

What is the relationship between self-injury and suicide?

Self-injury is **not** suicidal behavior. In fact, it may be a way to reduce the tension that, left unattended, could result in an actual suicide attempt. Self-injury is the best way the individual knows to self-soothe. It may represent the best attempt the person has at creating the least damage.

What can you do to help a friend or family member who is a self-injurer?

Some things that might be helpful include the following:

- Understand that self-harming behavior is an attempt to maintain a certain amount of control, and that it is a way of self-soothing
- Let him or her know that you care and that you will listen
- Encourage expression of emotions, including anger
- Spend time doing enjoyable activities together
- Offer to help find a therapist or support group
- Do not tell the person to stop the behavior or make judgmental comments—people who feel worthless and powerless are even more likely to self-injure
- If you are the parent of a self-injuring child, prepare yourself to address your family's difficulties with expression of feelings, as this is a common factor in self-injury—this is not about blame, but about a learning process that will help the entire family

How can a self-injuring person stop this behavior?

There are several things that can be done to help oneself. These include:

- Acknowledge that this IS a problem, that you are hurting on the inside, and that you need professional assistance to stop injuring yourself.
- Realize that this is not about being bad or stupid—this is about recognizing that a behavior that somehow was helping you handle your feelings has become as big a problem as the one it was trying to solve in the first place.
- Find one person you trust—maybe a friend, teacher, minister, counselor, or relative—and say that you need to talk about something serious that is bothering you.
- Get help in identifying what “triggers” your self-harming behaviors and ask for help in developing ways to either avoid or address those triggers
- Recognize that self-injury is an attempt to self-soothe, and that you need to develop other, better ways to calm and soothe yourself
- Try some substitute activities when you feel like hurting yourself—there are some examples listed below:
 - If cutting is a way **to deal with anger** that you cannot express openly, try taking those feelings out on something else—running, dancing fast, screaming, punching a pillow, throwing something, ripping something apart
 - If cutting is a way **to feel something** when you feel numb inside, try holding ice or a package of frozen food, taking a very hot or very cold shower, chewing something with a very strong taste (like chili peppers, raw ginger root, or a grapefruit peel), or snapping a rubber band hard on your wrist
 - If cutting is a way **to calm yourself**, try taking a bubble bath, doing deep breathing, writing in a journal, drawing, or doing some yoga
 - If cutting involves your **having to see blood**, try drawing a red ink line where you would usually cut yourself, in combination with other suggestions above

What can parents do about self-injury?

- Parents must listen to their child and acknowledge their child's feelings. (In other words, parents should validate feelings—not necessarily the teen's behavior.)
- Parents should also serve as role models in the way they deal with stressful situations and traumatic events, in how they respond to other people, by not allowing abuse or violence in the home, and by not engaging in acts of self-harm.
- Evaluation by a mental health professional may assist in identifying and treating the underlying causes of self-injury. A mental health professional can also diagnose and treat any mental health disorder that may accompany self-injurious behavior.
- Feelings of wanting to die or suicidal plans are reasons for parents to IMMEDIATELY seek professional care for their child.

Resources



1-800-DON'T CUT (800-366-8288)

SAFE Alternatives Program

The Cutting Edge (A Newsletter)
P.O. Box 20819
Cleveland, OH 44120

[Self-Injury: You Are Not The Only One](#)

Contains definitions, causes, demographics, therapeutic approaches, and more

[Self-Injury.org](#)

Help for self-injury, depression, suicidal thoughts, message boards, and links

[“Self-Mutilation” in Psychiatry—One Patient’s View](#)

A personal story of self-injury, information, and links

[National Mental Health Association](#) provides a good overview of the types, causes, and treatment of self-injurious behavior.

[Self-injury: A quick guide to the basics](#)—From the American Self-Harm Information

Clearinghouse, provides simple and clear definitions of what self-injury is and is not, myths and purposes, and a variety of links to assistance. There are also several other sections on this site that provide useful information.

Contact Information

Contact your local school counselor for additional information. You may also contact Mrs. Patrice Harris, Intervention Supervisor, at 972-6857 or pharris@bcbe.org.