

Self-Injury

by Jeff Dess

One definition of self-injury describes the behavior as “deliberate damaging of body tissue without the eventual intention of suicide”. (Fauazza and Rosenthal 1993)

Below are points taken from interviews with young people along with information from different areas of self injury research.

1. Self injury can become habitual and follow some of the same patterns as addictive behavior. Many young people have shared that they use it as a coping skill. Research would call this a maladaptive coping skill.
2. Survival skill- most do not want to kill themselves so they cut to normalize feelings to reduce emotional discomfort. The cutting takes away the pain and becomes a distraction.
3. Many young people self injure because it may be in style or faddish behavior. Many may have an older brother or sister who cuts or they have heard about it and wanted to know what it feels like. Many young kids have shared that the music they listen to, at times, encourages cutting.
4. Many young people who self injure may have an underlying mood disorder. This would need to be assessed by a professional. Some young people may need professional help, while others who cut try it once and never repeat the behavior.
5. Many of these kids become guilt or shame based depending on how long the cutting goes on. Many cut in private and it only comes out when the cutter loses control over the behavior.
6. Many of these kids have poor coping skills.
7. Some young people cut due to their own internal pain while others cut in reaction to a situation.
8. Some young people who cut have been sexually abused.
9. Some young people who cut are perfectionists. They lack the coping skills to deal with imperfection. One young girl, who was a junior in high school, shared that she had a difficult time handling all of her AP classes, sports and social life, but did not want to share her stress with others. She did not want to be judged unfit or out of control. She was cutting for about six months before her friends finally found out and went to the school counselor to share their concerns. She did receive help and is doing much better.

The following 9 techniques come from the article - *A Guide for Those Engaged in Self-Injurious Behaviors and Those Who Care* By Lisa Voigt, M.S. These techniques can be used with young people in recovery from self-injury or those that are trying to stop on their own:

1. Rate the intensity of your urge to hurt yourself on a scale from 1-10.
 2. Identify which emotions you are feeling.
 3. Rate the intensity of each emotion on a scale from 1-10.
 4. Identify the situation you were in prior to your urge to hurt yourself.
 5. Identify the unhelpful/impulsive thoughts present when you had the urge to hurt yourself.
 6. Identify more helpful/more realistic thoughts to dispute the unhelpful ones.
 7. Rate the intensity of your emotions a scale from 1-10 after completing this log.
 8. You may notice that working through this activity helps you more closely identify what you are feeling and thinking, and how a situation that occurred before the desire to self injure may be connected to the urge. Some people find that the urge to self injure greatly decreases after going through this step by step process.
 9. It may also be helpful to think about the first time self-injury occurred, the situations and emotional factors at that time, and how they were dealt with.
- Create a list of activities that you can do to distract yourself from self-injurious behavior.

The following strategies come from several different sources. One source is from young people who have been in therapy for self-injury and shared with me what worked for them. The other source includes websites in the USA and UK that explore ideas that may be helpful to the person who self injures.

- A. Rubber band around the wrist. Young people would take the rubber band and snap it when they felt the urge to cut.
- B. Counting backwards can help bring the mind to attention and prevent a self-harm episode.
- C. Focusing on the immediate environment and thinking about something they can see, smell, hear, taste and touch is another way of redirecting the mind away from self-harming.
- D. Simple deep breathing techniques can also prove calming and distracting.
- E. Some people who have cut themselves in the past have reported that marking themselves with a red, water-soluble pen or rubbing ice (for a short while) in the place where they have the urge to cut can help them avoid self-harm. If the urge itself cannot be eradicated, the goal should be to minimize the harm done.
- F. Encourage known self-harmers to be wary of making bad decisions when in a frenzy of emotion. Pausing to think before taking action or succumbing to a knee-jerk response to events is sound advice for all students and doesn't single out self-harmers.
- G. Encourage the person who self injures to make a list of those who care about them. It is important for them to understand how their decision to cut may impact those on their list.

One way for friends and family members to give their support to the person who is self injuring is not to judge them. If self-injury is about control, telling them to stop or quit does not really benefit the person as much as saying we love and care about you and together we will get through this. Getting through difficult times is one factor that separates the healthy family from the family that continues to stay stuck, repeating the same strategy and expecting different results.

Sources:

1. Recovering young people who were into self injury
2. University of Wisconsin-wellness center- Explaining Self-Injurious Behaviors *A Guide for Those Engaged in Self-Injurious Behaviors and Those Who Care* by Lisa Voigt, M.S. UW-Eau Claire Counseling Services
3. http://www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm
4. <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/en/pain/microsite/culture4.html>
5. www.teachernet.com
6. <http://www.focusas.com/SelfInjury.html>
7. <http://www.palace.net/~llama/psych/ther.html>- also has a link to [Dialectical Behavioral Therapy](#)
8. http://www.cde.state.co.us/ssw/pdf/SSWConf2005_Finger_Jennifer_Self-Injury_CSSWA_Handout.pdf Good PowerPoint on self-injury for educators and parents alike.
9. Turn Up The Music- www.jeffdess.com