

Self-injury can be likened to an "emotional safety valve", "throwing an emotional safety switch" or "turning down the emotional thermostat"

Childhood Trauma

e.g., abuse, neglect, loss, chronic invalidation

Melting pot of unexpressed emotions/emotional pain
(anger, rage, frustration, fear, sadness, guilt, self-hate)

Emotional Overload

Emotions become:

"Too real"
"Out of control"
"Overwhelming"

Person feels:

"Unable to cope"
"About to explode/disintegrate"

Self-Injury: Aim

To change the focus from internal to external & re-establish a sense of control/emotional balance

Consequences

Traumatized person may waver/swing from one extreme to the other—between feeling emotionally overwhelmed to feeling emotionally numb (dissociated). This process can happen almost spontaneously and the person may not be consciously aware of the process.

Dissociative episodes such as depersonalization and derealization prior to self-injury are common. Below, three self-injurers provide important insights into how they are experienced:

Quotes about dissociative experiences

"I assure you, it is a most unpleasant experience and an incentive to self-injure as soon as possible."
[Rev. Dianna - male]

"It usually feels like someone else has taken over or like a dazed out feeling." [Crystal]

Emotional Shutdown

Numbing, dissociation
(depersonalization)
(derealization)

Coping strategies used to ward off overwhelming emotions (may be an automatic response to feeling unable to cope).

Person feels:

"Unreal"
"Dead inside"
"Separated from body"
"Not connected"

Self-Injury: Aim

To terminate frightening episodes of depersonalization, dissociation, derealization and/or emotional numbness

Consequences

Explaining Self-Injurious Behaviors
A guide for those engaged in self-injurious behaviors, and those who care about them

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What Are Self-Injurious Behaviors?

Self-injurious behaviors are behaviors that people intentionally engage in that cause physical bodily harm to themselves. Self-harm is often carried out when individuals attempt to deal with difficult or overwhelming emotions, and are not sure how to more effectively manage their emotions. Self-injury may take on several forms, most commonly cutting, scraping, burning, biting or hitting. Physical and emotional scars may be left as a result of self-injury. Self destructive behaviors are not to be confused with body piercings or tattoos that are sought for the purpose of self-decoration.

Why Do People Self-Injure?

Based on research, people who engage in self-injurious behaviors claim to experience little to no pain while they are hurting themselves. Rationales for self-injury include feeling anger toward themselves or others, or relieving pain, anger and tension.

Are Self-Injurious Behaviors Suicidal Gestures?

Not necessarily-but be aware. Individuals who engage in self-injurious behaviors are most likely feeling a lot of pain, and may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. Since there is a strong link between suicidality and depression, it is important for concerned others to invite open communication about self-injury and suicidality. A common myth is that asking individuals if they are contemplating suicide affects their likelihood to attempt or complete suicide. Rather, asking about self-injury or suicide may help people know that you care about them and welcome open communication. If you

have concerns about the endangerment of somebody's life, whether they self-injure or not, contact a local hospital, police, or Counseling Services.

What Can be Done if You Are Considering Injuring Yourself?

First, people generally do not wish to hurt themselves, but see no better way of managing their emotions. The suggestions below are for people who have made the decision to quit self-injuring, and are looking for alternative strategies to deal with their emotions. Author Deb Martinson suggests looking at the emotions behind the urge to help determine which strategies you might try. (Anger, frustration, restlessness, sadness, melancholic, craving sensation, wanting to see blood, wanting to focus):

Techniques to Try:

Distract yourself. Get away from the situation you are in, and do something else.

Talk with someone who is supportive, such as a family member, friend, RA, hall director, or counselor.

Engage in another activity that requires stimulation. Give yourself a massage, take a hot or cold shower, squeeze ice, finger paint, or squish Play-doh.

Exercise is a way of quickly managing emotions. Go for a brisk walk or run, punch a pillow, swim, lift weights, or engage in other aerobic activities that require physical exertion.

Pamper yourself by doing something soothing. Read, listen to music, take a relaxing bath, look at the moon or clouds, open a window to get some fresh air.

Make a list of activities to engage in that have been helpful in the past when you had the urge to self-injure. Keep this list handy to refer to if you do have the urge to self-injure.

Log the Following Information If You Have the Urge to Self-Injure:

Rate the intensity of your urge to hurt yourself on a scale from 1-10.

Identify which emotions you are feeling.

Rate the intensity of each emotion on a scale from 1-10.

Identify the situation you were in prior to your urge to hurt yourself.

Identify the unhelpful/impulsive thoughts present when you had the urge to hurt yourself.

Identify more helpful/more realistic thoughts to dispute the unhelpful ones.

Rate the intensity of your emotions a scale from 1-10 after completing this log.

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.

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.

How Can I Break Free From Self-Injury?

Recognizing that there is hope beyond self-injury is the first step, and Counseling Services can be great support. People often fear that self-injury will be seen as shameful or secretive. It does not have to be. A counselor can be the empathic encourager coaching individuals to help meet their goals. A counselor can work with individuals to help increase coping mechanisms, and to provide support as people look more deeply at their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. By looking at factors associated with self-injury, and underlying concerns, many can begin to break free from self-injury. Additionally, seeking assistance from Health Services or a health care professional may be beneficial, as there is research that suggests that medication in addition to therapy may help those who self-injure.

For Concerned Others:

It can be difficult to know that ones you care about deliberately injures themselves. It can be difficult to not want to rush in and “save” them from their pain. People engaging in self-injurious behaviors need to be the ones making the decision to change their behaviors. You can share your concern, and urge them to ask for help. You can also let them know that you are available to call if they have the urge to self-injure, feel emotionally overwhelmed, or want to be with someone. Unconditionally showing them that they do not need to self-injure to get love and attention from you can be helpful. Asking if you can take them out to a movie, or to get a snack is a way to provide a distraction, and gives them the chance to accept your offer.

If you are living in the residence halls, asking an RA or hall director to become a part of a support team can be an important step in empowering the person self-injuring, especially if the self-injury is distressing others, or endangering the safety of the one you care about.

Communicating with the Self-Injurer

There is no doubt that approaching the subject of self-injury with someone you care about is a difficult task. The important thing to remember is that open communication is the key and most self-injurers, although perhaps in denial or defensive at first, are carrying a very heavy burden with this most personal secret. Once you

perceive a loved one is self-injuring here are some guidelines that may be helpful:

- Educate yourself on self-injury prior to talking to them
- Have resources available so both of you are well equipped to handle whatever may result from the talk
- Prepare yourself that your worst fear (they may indeed be injuring themselves) may become reality so you don't over-react emotionally and ultimately make them feel like they cannot open up to you
- Find a quiet time and place to talk where you will not be interrupted
 - Prepare to listen and provide supportive feedback
 - Stay away from accusations as this will probably result in them feeling unsafe and withdrawing and detaching
 - Start the conversation by letting them know how much you love and care about their well being
 - Let them know what is discussed will be held in confidence and that they can talk to you about anything they are feeling
 - Begin your discussion with your observations and concerns and make sure they are structured with feeling statements i.e. "I feel concerned, scared, anxious, etc. for your safety and emotional well-being because I've noticed all of these cuts on your arms and I'm worried that you may be hurting yourself..."
 - Listen, just listen
 - Through listening, try and identify the source of their self-injury and how seriously they self-injure
 - Let them know how good it makes you feel that they are able to talk to you and ask how you can help them
 - Try not to make them feel guilty and ashamed as this can be triggering and may cause them to want to self-injure
 - Keep the lines of communication open and seek help together
 - Keep your promise of confidentiality UNLESS you believe they are suicidal or of extreme danger to themselves and/or others

Helpful responses to self-injury

Short Term

- Show that you see and care about the person in pain behind the self-injury.
- Show concern for the injuries themselves. Whatever 'front' she may put on, a person who has injured herself is usually deeply distressed, ashamed and vulnerable. You have an opportunity to offer compassion and respect - something different from what she may be used to receiving.

- Make it clear that self-injury is alright to talk about and can be understood. If you feel upset by the injuries it may be best to be honest about this, while being clear that you can deal with your own feelings and don't blame her for them.
- Convey your respect for the person's efforts to survive, even though this involves hurting herself. She has done the best she could.
- Acknowledge how frightening it may be to think of living without self-injury. Reassure the person that you will not try to 'steal' her way of coping. (Also reassure yourself you are not responsible for what she does to herself.)

Longer-term

- Help the person make sense of her self-injury, e.g. ask when the self-injury started, and what was happening then. Explore how it has helped the person to survive in the past and now. Retrace with her the steps leading up to self-injury - the events, thoughts and feelings which lead to it.
- Gently encourage the person to use the urge to self-injure as a signal - of important but buried experiences, feelings and needs. When she feels ready, help her learn to express these things in other ways, such as through talking, writing, drawing, shouting, hitting something, etc.
- Support the person in beginning to take steps to keep herself safe and to reduce her self-injury - if she wishes to. Examples of very valuable steps might be: taking fewer risks (e.g. washing implements used to cut, avoiding drinking if she thinks she is likely to self-injure); taking better care of injuries; reducing severity or frequency of injuries even a little. In all cases more choice and control are being exercised.
- Don't see stopping self-injury as the only, or most important goal. A person may make great progress in many ways and still need self-injury as a coping method for some time. Self-injury may also worsen for a while when difficult issues or feelings are being explored, or when old patterns are being changed. It may take a long time for a person to be ready to give up self-injury. Encourage her and yourself by acknowledging each small step as a major achievement.