 

timely techniques to help your child get through the school year

Self-Injury

Self-Injury: “a volitional act to harm one’s body without intention to die as a result of the behavior” (Favazza, 1996, 1987; Simeon & Favazza, 2001). Also the “deliberate, impulsive mutilation of the body, or body part, not with the intent to commit suicide, but as a way of managing emotions that seem too painful for words to express” (Conterio, 1998).

Examples of Self-Injurious Behaviors:

* Cutting
* Skin picking
* Hair pulling
* Burning
* Punching oneself
* Scalding
* Scratching
* Scab-picking
* Inserting objects into the body
* Bruising or breaking bones
* Banging head
* Any other behaviors that cause immediate harm

Common Terms:

* Self-injury
* Self-harm
* Self-mutilation
* Non-suicidal self-injury/non-suicidal self-harm
* Repetitive Self-Mutilation Syndrome (RMS)
* Para suicidal behavior
* Cutting
* Self-abuse
* Self-Inflicted Violence (SIV)
* Self-Injurious Behavior
* \*\*Terms to avoid include “suicidal gesture” and “self-mutilation” as they can be inaccurate, misleading and are considered extreme/sensational

Statistics:

* Age of onset typically between 12 – 15 years old
* Research suggests that it may continue into 30s
* More females than males (but a small difference)
* Impact similar across races/ethnicities/cultures/SES
* Many report that they self-injure repeatedly for years
* Difficult to know absolute numbers because it’s often kept very private

Why? 3 major categories…

* Affect regulation: trying to bring the body back to equilibrium in the face of turbulent or unsettling feelings
* Communication: Expressing something that he or she cannot do verbally
* Control/Punishment: includes trauma re-enactment, bargaining and magical “if-then” thinking, protecting others and self-control
* Also…
  + Bullying
  + Sexual/Emotional/Physical abuse
  + Neglect
  + School/work pressures
  + Financial difficulties
  + Relationship troubles
  + Family problems
  + Bereavement
  + Loneliness/isolation
  + Feeling emotionally numb
  + Difficulty identifying feelings
  + Eating disorders
  + Drug/alcohol problems
  + Coming to terms with sexuality
  + …any other experience/event that can cause negative feelings, thoughts or emotions

Warning Signs:

* Unexplained frequent injuries, including cuts and burns
* Wearing long pants and sleeves in warm weather
* Low self-esteem
* Overwhelmed by feelings/excessive rage or depression
* Inability to function at home, school or work
* Inability to maintain stable relationships
* Changes in social interactions or interests
* Increased isolation or withdrawal

Interventions/Ways to Help:

* Training/Knowing warning signs
* Being calm/matter-of-fact when a student is talking to you about it; show you care
* Have discussions in private
* Convey it’s ok to talk about it, but limit any discussion to an inability to cope, requiring help (not about the actually injuring behavior)
* Refer to designated mental health professional
* Convey respect for the person’s ability to talk to someone in their effort to survive
* Help them make sense of their self-injuring, getting to the root of the problem
* Help them create supportive network
* Don’t see stopping the self-injury as the main goal
* It takes time
* Don’t minimize the behavior
* Don’t assume reasons why
* Don’t have class discussions

There is no formal classification for Self-Injury in the DSM-IV-TR. However, it is a commonly occurring symptom with certain disorders, including:

* Borderline Personality Disorder
* Depression
* Eating Disorders
* Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
* Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
* Dissociative Disorders
* Anxiety and Panic Disorders
* Impulsive Disorder Not Otherwise Specified

Myths and Facts about Self-Injury

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| --- | --- |
| **Myth** | **Fact** |
| Self-injury, such as wrist-cutting, should be considered a suicide attempt | Self-injury is generally not about suicide; few people die by cutting their wrists; however, more concerning methods such as gunshots, hanging, overdose, poison ingestion and jumping from dangerous heights may be suicidal ideation/attempts |
| Self-injury is mostly about attention-seeking or manipulating others | “attention seeking” or “manipulation” is not an adequate explanation; there are far more effective ways to gain attention and using these terms often indicates frustration with the adult/caregiver involved. Also it is NOT done for sexual pleasure/gratification, body decoration, religious ritual, cultural compliance, fitting in or being cool or suicide (usually) |
| Like anorexia, self-injury is mostly a problem in females | Studies have found rates of self-injury to be almost equal in both sexes |
| Most individuals who self-injure have been sexually abused | Studies of clinical samples have shown larger percentages of self-injuring individuals with histories of sexual abuse; however, this is not true for community based samples necessarily |
| Self-injury is a fad; if you ignore it, the student will grow out of it | Self-injury should not be minimized; it involves real tissue damage and potential scaring and is indicative of serious distress |
| Most people who self-injure are mentally ill and probably won’t get better | The behavior is treatable and the prognosis is good; not necessarily related to mental illness |
| Professional tattoos and piercings are the same as self-injury | Body modification obtained from professionals is typically considered separate and distinct from self-injury because it is a deliberate, planned, public event |
| Self-injury is not a problem at my school | Based on an emerging body of research, self-injury is occurring at high rates in many middle and high schools (10 – 20%) |

\*Most information taken from the *Signs of Self-Injury* curriculum

Resources…

Websites 🡪

May Clinic: Mayo Clinic is a nonprofit worldwide leader in medical care, research and education for people from all walks of life. Doctors from every medical specialty work together to care for patients, joined by common systems and a philosophy of "the needs of the patient come first."

Website: www.mayoclinic.org

Recover Your Life: One of the biggest and best Self-Harm Support Communities on the internet. Although we are known for helping people suffering with Self Harm, we also welcome and support people with other issues such as Eating Disorders, Mental Health problems, those dealing with Abuse, and many more! We do not condone any pro-activity or encourage anyone to hurt themselves in any way.

Website: [www.recoveryourlife.com](http://www.recoveryourlife.com)

S.A.F.E. Alternatives: S.A.F.E. ALTERNATIVES® is a world-renowned treatment program that in it's more than twenty years of operation has helped thousands of people successfully end self-injurious behavior. A treatment team of experts uses therapy, education, and support to empower clients to identify healthier ways to cope with emotional distress. The S.A.F.E. ALTERNATIVES® philosophy and model of treatment focus on shifting control to the client, empowering them to make healthy choices, including the choice to not self-injure. Quality of Life is a Choice.

Website: [www.selfinjury.com](http://www.selfinjury.com)

Books For Teens 🡪

Moskowitz, H. (2009). *Break*. Simon and Schuster: NY.

Shapiro, L. (2008). *Stopping the pain: A workbook for teens who cut and self-injure.* New Harbinger: CA.

Stoeher, S. (2003). *Crosses*. iUniverse: NE.

Books For Parents 🡪

Bowman, S. & Randall, K. (2006). *See my pain! Creative strategies and activities for helping young people who self-injure.* YouthLight: SC.

Hollander, M. (2008). *Helping teens who cut: Understanding and ending self-injury*. The Guildford Press: NY.

Khemlani-Petal, S., McVey-Noble, M., & Neziroglu, F. (2006). *When your child is cutting: A parent’s guide to helping children overcome self-injury*. New Harbinger: CA.

Some information for this article was taken from:

Powerpoint presentation created by Octavianne Maroncelli, LCSW presented at the Suicide Prevention Symposium on June 4, 2012 and attended by Sarah Kohn, William Roberts School Psychologist.

S.A.F.E. Alternatives website accessed by the School Psychologist on June 20, 2012 @ [www.selfinjury.com](http://www.selfinjury.com)