

Family Counseling of Springfield



Information for Families of Self Injurers

What is self-injury?

"Self-injury" is any sort of self-harm which involves inflicting injuries or pain on one's own body. It can take many forms. The most common form of self-injury is probably cutting, usually superficially, but sometimes deeply. Women may also burn themselves, punch themselves or hit their bodies against something. Some people pick their skin or pull out hair.

How common is self-injury?

Self-injury is far more widespread than is generally realized. Many women who self-injure believe they are the only person that hurts herself in this way. Fear and shame may force women to keep self-injury secret for many years. This means that the true extent of the problem is unknown. Our experience shows that where it is acceptable to talk about, many women reveal that they have self-injured at some time.

Why do women self-injure?

There are always powerful reasons why a woman hurts herself. For most women, it's a way of surviving great emotional pain.

Many people cope with difficulties in their lives in ways, which are risky and harmful to them. Some drink or eat too much, smoke, drive too fast, gamble or make themselves ill through overwork or worry. They might do this to numb or distract themselves from problems or feelings they cannot bear to face. (Like "drowning your sorrows")

Self-injury, though more shocking, bears many similarities to this "ordinary" form of self-harm. Like drink or drugs, hurting herself may help a woman block out painful feelings. Like taking risks or gambling, it may provide danger and distraction.

Often women say that self-injury helps them to release unbearable tension, which may arise from anxiety, grief or anger. It puts their pain outside, where it feels easier to cope with. For others it relieves feelings of guilt or shame. Sometimes a woman's self-injury is a "cry for help"; a way of showing (even to herself) that she has suffered and is in pain. Perhaps hurting herself is a way of feeling "real" and alive, or having control over something in her life. What lie behind women's distress may be painful experiences in childhood or adulthood. A woman may have suffered neglect or abuse, or may have always been criticized or silenced, rather than supported and allowed to express her needs and feelings. Some women who self-injure lost parents early, or came from chaotic or violent families. For others, experiences of emotional or physical cruelty have led to their desperation.

Myths about self-injury

Self-injury is a failed suicide attempt.

Self-injury is a way of carrying on with life, not of dying. Injuries are seldom life threatening. It is important to distinguish self-injury from a suicide attempt, so that its true meanings can be understood.

Self-injury is "just attention seeking".

Self-injury is primarily about helping oneself cope with great pain. For some, it is a desperate attempt to show that something is really wrong, and attention should be paid to their distress.

Self-injury is a sign of madness.

Self-injury is a sign of distress, not madness; a sign of someone trying to cope with her life as best she can.

A person who self-injures is a danger to others.

Someone who self-injures is directing her hurt and anger at herself, not at others. Most would be appalled at the idea of hurting someone else.

What can help?

Self-injury causes great distress, and can seem a difficult problem to overcome. But it is possible for a woman to stop hurting herself, if she can understand and resolve the problems behind what she does.

If you are someone who self-injures...

Think about what your self-injury is "saying" about your feelings and your life. This will give you clues about problems you need to work on. You might find it helpful to talk about your self-injury and what lies behind it with friends or a counselor. To find out about counseling, you could ask your G.P., Women's Center, rape or sexual abuse support service.

If you want to help someone who self-injures...

Naturally you may feel upset, shocked or angry when someone you care about hurts herself. Try to keep seeing the person in pain behind the injuries. The most precious thing you can offer is acceptance and support. Let this person know you understand that self-injury is helping her to cope at the moment. She is not "bad" or "mad" for doing it. You could invite her to talk about her feelings, or to call you if she is having a difficult time. Only offer as much as you can cope with, and don't try to take responsibility for stopping her from hurting herself.

What To Say, What Not To Say

If a person comes to you and say's, " I have just cut myself, head banged, scratched, etc., or I feel like self-injuring", Ask that person, " How would you like me to respond to that," in a soft and meaningful way. We do not want nor is it helpful to place ourselves in a situation where we are wrong no matter what we say. The idea is that we cannot fix or prevent self-injury. We can however place the responsibility of a self-injurers choice where it belongs, with the person making choices.

We do not want to directly address the self-injury; rather what might be helpful to that person in the moment. We do not ask "WHY", as it sets up a power struggle and increases the potential for shame, which normally leads to further isolation. When in doubt always ask, how can I be helpful? Again, this places responsibility where it belongs, with the person asking for help.

**For more information, contact
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