What Is Self-Injury or Self-Mutilation?

Self-injury is not something people talk about very often, but for an estimated 2 to 3 million Americans it is a serious problem. The majority of people who self-injure are women between the ages of 13 and 30, but there are "cutters" of every age, gender, and economic group.

People who "self-injure" are not usually suicidal. They do however, intentionally inflict injuries upon themselves, usually in response to stress or trauma. Their injuries may vary from minor cuts that heal quickly to very serious wounds that leave permanent scars. This is also known as "Deliberate Self-Harm Syndrome".

If you or someone you know self-injures, please get professional help right away. This is just an overview of a very complex myriad of syndromes.

Self-injury usually indicates that somewhere during development that person didn't learn good ways of coping with overwhelming feelings or stress. They're not sick or insane; they just never learned positive ways to deal with feelings and emotions for various reasons. Positive coping skills can be learned at any point in life. People who self-injure can learn to use new and healthier coping mechanisms. This process may take years to develop with the help of a skilled therapist familiar with this condition.

The late Princess Diana's words shocked the world when
she admitted in a television interview that she intentionally cut her arms and legs and had thrown herself down a flight of stairs on more than one occasion. FINALLY, self-injury -- the practice of deliberately cutting, scratching, burning, or otherwise injuring one's own body -- was about to come out of the closet. After that interview thousands of self-injury survivors called or wrote the media in response to that interview in just the United States alone.

Cutting seems to be the most common type of self-injury. "Cutters" often use razors, utility knives, scissors, needles, broken glass, or whatever they find to make repetitive slices on their arms, legs or other body parts. Some people burn themselves with cigarettes or lighters, others pull out their own hair. Many people who self-injure say they do it because they normally feel "numb" and cutting helps them to "feel alive." Others talk about the "sense of control" they may get from self-injury. This may be the first time or thing that they have felt a sense of control in their lives. Most agree that incidents of self-injury are triggered by stress and anxiety.

Self-injury is usually kept secret, and the "cutter" often feels deep shame and guilt from this ritual. People who self-injure are at risk for infections if their wounds are not treated properly. Permanent scarring can also result from self-injury and often does. Many people who self-injure wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and turtlenecks even in warm weather to conceal the marks they've left on their own bodies.

**Why Do People Self-Injure?**

This problem is not completely understood by health care
professionals or psychologists. It seems to be most common among people who have been sexually abused as children, molested as children, or by survivors of incest.

Whatever the context or reason, self-injury seems to function as a coping mechanism. "Cutters" use self-harm to feel calm, "in control," or just to "feel something." However, self-injury is not a healthy coping mechanism - it is a self-destructive behavior that probably reflects deeper, more complicated mental health or personal problems. (See the end of this article for some quotes and "stories" of people who self-injure).

**Some Common Factors of Self-Injury**

- Age of onset between 10 - 16 years old
- 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

**Some Common Reasons Why People Cut Themselves**
These are some of the reasons our readers who "cut" shared with us.

- **They find it soothing:**
  - To feel pain on the outside instead of the inside
  - To cope with feelings
  - To express anger towards themselves
  - To feel alive and real

- **A way of communicating what they can't say with words:**
To tell people they need help
To get people's attention
To tell people they should be in hospital

**An attempt to get people to react to their actions:**
To get people to care for them
To make other people feel guilty
To drive people away
To get away from stress and responsibility
To manipulate situations or people

**Triggering Events Reported by Young Adults Who Self-Injure:**

Being rejected by someone who is important to them
Being blamed for something over which they had no control
Feeling inadequate
Being "wrong" in some way

**RECOVERY**

People who self-injure can learn to use new and healthier coping mechanisms. This process may take years to develop. It also is important to get help from a therapist who specialized in self-injury. He or she can help the person figure out what lies behind the urge to cut or injure. New coping mechanisms may include exercising, painting, writing, yoga or dancing instead of hurting oneself. A process that involves self-expression is often helpful. Whatever works as an alternative method of coping with the feelings of anxiety or stress or "numbness" is often a good start toward recovery.
If you hurt yourself intentionally, remember you are not alone. You might think that this behavior makes you a "weird," but you can see from the statistics that it is more common than you thought. Talk to a counselor, therapist or your health care provider, chances are they've helped others with this same problem. Whatever pain or bad experiences underlie your urge to self-injure, a professional can help you to heal, both inside and out.

See: The Benefits of Anger Management and Anger Control

The following was sent to us from a teen who wanted to share her "story" of self-mutilation with Cool Nurse readers. Kandy is a bright, articulate, creative teenager, "normal" teenager, except for this one "thing" in her life. She sent this to us so that more people might understand self-mutilation and self-injury. Thank you Kandy! You were the first person to write to Cool Nurse to share your experience with others.

The next 2 pages of self-injury quotes were sent to us after this article was originally one of the "Topics of The Month" for November 2000. We continue to get letters from teens & adults who want to share the experiences of self-injury. Thank you to all for being so brave and for helping with awareness.

My Story - from "Kandy" (Age 16)

I started self-mutilating when I was five years old. I'm not sure how it started, but I was consistently pulled my eyelashes out all through the years. My mother would tell me “Stop that or your eyelashes will be bald someday”. I laughed at the thought, until one day it came true.
In elementary school, I used to get so stressed out about school and none of my friends being in the same school (I was a social reject in my school) I would come home and hit my head against the wall and stab myself with my pencil.

When I was in 6th grade, my father died, and things got much worse. My mother was too depressed to really notice my depression, and the rest of my family never really noticed either. Emotions you wouldn't believe built up inside me as that same year my Grandmother died. Also, my 2 dogs died (one being only a puppy).

The following year, two good family friends died of car accidents and cancer, and my friend I had just met committed suicide. Things got even worse.

My biggest mistake? I never cried and after a while, I wasn't able to cry.

In 7th grade, I experimented with hanging myself, but used a cheap piece of string from my ceiling fan. Needless to say; it broke.

Eighth grade, the cutting started. I started cutting my left wrist (the top, not the bottom, so people wouldn't get suspicious) with a Swiss army knife. One day, I cut too deep. I probably could have fit my index finger into the laceration. I was taken to the clinic in the worst blizzard in years by my mom (She is so great to me, I love her).

The only thing that kept me from a mental hospital was that I lied and told them (and mom, who found out the real story later) that I had cut my wrist on the bathroom counter. You know what they said at the clinic? "Sharp Counter." Right.
I didn't get stitches, but I did get a large bandage on my wrist for a while. I told the lie to everyone, and they believed it. After that, I found my knife had disappeared mysteriously from my drawer and so then I played with a pin, making boat designs and smiley faces on ...my arms. I played with death too, putting a belt on the rail in my closet and putting my neck through, letting myself get close enough to dying in that my heart pounded in my head and I heard voices.

Finally, in 9th grade, I made the mistake of cutting myself with a razor and telling the school counselor what had happened. Well, my mom was told, and that was the end of that. She and I and my brother had a family meeting, and I have to stay clear of razors, etc. or else. I am in counseling once every two weeks now. I was on Prozac (I quit .. didn't help me much) but I am now trying to keep away from anything self-destructive.

So now... my eyelashes have started growing back and I can cry sometimes.

Kandy, Age 16 - (Somewhere in the USA, 2000)

More Quotes From Readers:

"I hurt myself for different reasons, depending on my state of mind. I do it sometimes as a way to get relief from the pain I am feeling inside. Other times I do because at the time I feel I deserve to be punished, or I am angry at myself, but really I think someone else. Other times I do it to "shout out" to the world that I need help and here is the proof. I am a incest survivor, so I think that it's some of the pain that I have had to live with trying to escape my body. (Dianne, Age 30, Canada)"
"I cut myself because I feel so much pain inside that I need a way to release it all. So by cutting myself, it acts as an outlet for that pain, I guess, somehow. It feels like it's all running out of me when I see myself bleeding. I know that probably sounds gross to most people who don't do this. Yes, I am in group therapy for people who self-injure". (Chrissy, Age 17, USA)

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 board and links.

"Self-Mutilation" in Psychiatry -- One Patients View
A personal story of self-injury, information and links.

Recommended Reading: Click on title for more info or to order...
Cutting The Pain Away -by Ann Holmes; Carol C. Nadelson
Women Who Hurt Themselves, A Book of Hope and Understanding – Dusty Miller
Women Living with Self-Injury
Skin Game - A Cutter's Memoir
Bodies Under Siege - A. Favazza, MD
Healing The Hurt Within
A Bright Red Scream: Self Mutilation & The Language of Pain - Marilee Strong
Cut - Patricia McCormick
The Scarred Soul: Understanding & Ending Self-Inflicted Violence - Tracy Alderman, PhD
Bodily Harm: The Breakthrough Healing Program for Self-Injurers - Wendy Lader, Ph.D., (clinical director of SAFE Alternatives) and Karen Conterio

This information was compiled by http://www.coolnurse.com/self-injury.htm