

Sharon had been self-injuring since she was 15. She used to think there was nothing wrong with it, but as she took the blade from her purse and placed it to her arm, this time she had some underlying feelings of uneasiness. She was now in college and realizing how completely dependent she was on self-injury to get her through even a single day. She knew it wasn't normal, but nothing else seemed to calm her inner pain. As she made the incision she closed her eyes, making sure not to cut too deep. She felt a rush of relief and the safety of finally having a sense of control. She took a breath, cleaned up, and left for class. She felt secure until the pain began to fade and the fear of people's reactions began to set in. She knew the act would worry the people she loved if they found out, and she hated herself for doing that to those so important to her. The self-hatred and shame of the self-injury drew her to repeat the act. She punished herself for being so selfish and inconsiderate. She was time and time again drawn into this cycle of destruction. For Sharon, this is a daily battle.

-----Self-Injury-----

What is self-injury?

Although the most common manifestation of self-injury involves cutting oneself with any sharp or jagged object, self-injury encompasses a range of other destructive behaviors, such as burning, wound interference/picking, hitting, hair-pulling—even breaking bones. In fact, much self-injury becomes a pattern of behaviors that are ritualistic. The individual must use the same tool, cut in the same places, etc.

Why do people engage in self-injury?

For many, self-injury is a way of coping with painful feelings such as:

- Worthlessness
- Vulnerability
- Detachment
- Panic
- Anger
- Guilt
- Helplessness
- Rejection
- Self-hatred
- Confused Sexuality
- Failure
- Loneliness

People who engage in self-injury do so for many reasons. It allows for a physical expression of overwhelming internal emotions, and for others, it serves to temporarily relieve stress and anxiety caused by these emotions. Some people don't even feel the injury when they cut, and some use it as an attempt to bring themselves out of a numb state; the blood reminds them they are alive and human.

Oftentimes, these emotions are a result of early life stressors such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, death, or divorce. It usually takes a combination of these stressors for someone to begin engaging in self-injury.

****Self-injury such as cutting is an unhealthy coping strategy but is usually not a suicide attempt. Self harm can leave scars literally and some research has shown that other coping strategies can work better****

Self-injury is a vicious cycle

Cutting releases brain chemicals called endorphins the same chemicals referred to in the “runners high.” Some researchers think that the pain relief of the endorphins soothes some people, at least in the short run. Yet the shame and embarrassment that go with this coping strategy often make people regret they use it once they move on to more adaptive ways of dealing with severe stress.

What help is available for those who self-injure?

→ Medications (mood stabilizers, anxiolytics, antidepressants, etc.) have been used with some success
→ Therapeutic approaches are being developed that will help self-harmers learn new coping mechanisms to use instead of self-injury

****Encourage your friend to get an evaluation if you see her cutting, but it is not usually advisable to tell a person to stop her coping mechanisms. She must learn to develop more strategies to handle stress. There are many complex therapies used for self-injury, including Dialectical Behavioral Therapy****

Warning: Regular or heavy alcohol use can worsen most psychological states, such as anxiety, depression, bipolar, schizophrenia, or eating problems. Alcohol can change the way a person feels in the short run; however, the overall effect only worsens a disorder. Marijuana and other drugs can have similar or more serious effects on the brain.

**For more information visit the National Institute of Mental Health at www.nimh.nih.gov or:
The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-www.nami.org or 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)
SAFE (Self Abuse Finally Ends) Alternatives- www.selfinjury.com & 1800-DONTCUT
American College Counseling Association www.collegecounseling.org
Screening for Mental Health www.mentalhealthscreening.org
National Panhellenic Conference www.npcwomen.org
National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide (NOPCAS) www.nopcas.org
National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association www.naapimha.org
The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org;
English 1-800-273-TALK; Spanish 1-800-628-9454
American Foundation for Suicide Prevention www.afsp.org**

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