

# Self-Injury

## When Pain Feels Good

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If you have never purposely hurt yourself, it seems impossible to understand those who have. After all, don't living creatures *avoid* pain?

But if you *have* purposely hurt yourself, such behavior seems necessary, normal, even right. In fact, like a diabetic giving herself an injection, it can feel like a temporary cure.

This booklet assumes that you feel trapped in a cycle of intentional self-injury or that you love someone who does. Either you want help, or you want to give it. If you want to help, realize that cutting and similar behavior have their reasons. Begin trying to understand this person's world. If you are the one who feels trapped by the behavior, know that the cure is much more attractive than you think. Right now, you may hate your behavior, but you also feel like you need it. Self-injury might be your way to protect yourself from something worse. To give it up feels like a huge risk. And it would be—if you were left with no alternative. But there is a better way.

## Anyone Feeling Alone?

No doubt you feel alone and isolated. You are reluctant to talk to people who want to help. When you do, they overreact. People just don't talk about purposeful self-injury anyway. No one uses it as a sermon illustration or mentions it in normal conversation. But though the behavior thrives on silence, those who self-injure number in the millions. Those who want to help number many more than that.

Fiona Apple, Garbage lead singer Shirley Manson, and actresses Angelina Jolie and Christina Ricci are a few celebrities who have acknowledged past problems with cutting. But this human experience has been around for a long time. The Bible describes ancient idol worshippers who "slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed" (1 Kings 18:28). They believed this would appease their god. The practice even appeared in Christianity during the Middle Ages, when self-flagellation and other harmful practices were common forms of penance. They continue today in more private forms of self-denial.

There is little comfort in knowing you are not alone, but if other people have experi-

enced it, maybe there is hope that you can be understood. If other people have helped, maybe you can help.

### What Is It?

Self-injurers do various things. Nail biters don't stop until their fingers bleed. Pickers pick and scratch until they damage their skin or inflame old wounds. Cutters always have a razor blade handy to score, mark, or slash their body, which they then try to hide. Others punch themselves black and blue or burn themselves with cigarettes. Some break bones.

Anorexia, or purposeful starvation, is a form of self-injury that can accompany other forms or act as a gateway to further self-abuse. Men and women who severely restrict their diet are perfectionists who can never be perfect. They also try to hide from their feelings, which creates an environment in which cutting and hitting can thrive.

All this sounds like a death wish, and self-injurers can be suicidal, but there is a difference between the two behaviors. Those who purposefully cut an artery are trying to kill themselves. They want life to be over. Cutters tend to be more careful about where or how

deeply they cut. They just want to feel better. Self-abusers typically want to live; they just don't know how to live with turbulent emotions.<sup>1</sup>

### Slow Down: Consider Your Ways

If someone is in danger, we feel we must do something immediately, like stand guard over the person, or stop the cutter before something more serious happens. These responses are appropriate and usually driven by love. But you might have to go against your instincts with this. If you want to help but sense danger, talk with the self-abuser about your concerns. Self-injurers realize that you want to protect them, so be open with them. Ask about *their* assessment of the danger if you are concerned about suicide. If you need help, talk with a wise person who can help you make good decisions. In other words, slow down. There is a logic to the self-injurer's behavior and you must listen to it. Keep this in mind: the other person is more

1 Self-abuse should also be distinguished from an autistic person's head banging and other self-harming behaviors, as well a schizophrenic's response to directive, hallucinatory voices.

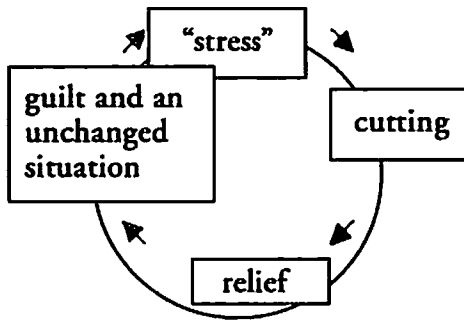
like you than you think. Beneath behavior that seems incomprehensible are familiar motivations—like fear, desire for control, hopelessness, sadness, anger.

If you are trapped in a self-injury cycle, you too must slow down. The cycle is becoming automatic. Your emotions tell you what to do and you robotically respond. Lies are becoming a way of life, distancing you from people who love you and might be able to help. Yes, slowing down can seem dangerous when your inner screams are getting louder and you feel that your only escape may soon be blocked. But there is another way. It is a path of wisdom, and wise people begin it by considering their ways.

## The Cycle

The roots of the self-abuse cycle go deep, but it tends to be activated by “stress”—a difficult circumstance and your emotional response, or an intolerable emotional experience that no longer needs cues to trigger it. Common stressors are anger and frustration, anxiety, or a jumping-out-of-your-skin agitation. If you have no alternatives, self-injury gradually becomes the preferred response *because it*

*works*. It provides an immediate sense of regained control and emotional relief. It offers a satisfying way to give voice to the silent screams within. In short, it brings peace; not lasting peace, but a crumb of calm or peace that is better than nothing. But when the experience of peace fades, the same circumstances and emotions are waiting to disrupt your inner world again, and the cycle continues, as the diagram shows.



### **Why Self-Abuse? What Is the Behavior Saying?**

It seems automatic, even instinctive, but there is a logic to self-inflicted pain. People do it for a reason. Even if the behavior is foreign to you, it isn't hard to think of some possible



reasons for it. For example, if you hit someone, you are saying that you don't like him. You hit an enemy, someone who makes you angry. Might the same reasons apply to self-injury? Self-injurers can be angry at themselves. They can feel as if they have done something that deserves punishment. More specifically, they can feel like their bodies betrayed them. Perhaps a woman was sexually assaulted, and has started to believe, *My body is bad*. She reasons that if she'd had a male body, she wouldn't have been violated. Therefore, her female body is bad. Of course, the perpetrator is the real culprit, but you can see how this woman's self-injurious behavior has meaning and purpose for her.

This is only one possible reason. There are dozens of others, and self-injurious behavior can be saying more than one thing. Our feelings and behaviors can be dense with layers of meaning. Here is some of the reasoning behind self-injury.

**“I am guilty. I must be punished.”**

This particular logic actually reveals keen insight—to a point. The biblical reality is that, before God, we all are guilty and deserve punishment. We have broken laws that reflect

God's character, so we have violated him. We follow our own desires rather than acknowledge that he is Lord. Some self-injurers even understand that shed blood is somehow the necessary penalty for guilt, as is demonstrated by their satisfaction when their cutting produces blood.

The problem is that this logic misses the deeper truth. When the Spirit of God reveals that we are guilty, he also reveals that *God himself provides the sacrifice*. In the Old Testament, the sacrifice was the blood of animals, but the people knew that this only offered a temporary cleansing. They had to shed this blood day after day, year after year. Thus the cutter is living like an Old Testament Hebrew who doesn't see that the sacrifices anticipate the Lamb of God. Jesus himself would take away the sins of the world once and for all.

**"I am not perfect."**

This is akin to guilt, but there is no obvious sin involved and God is not part of the picture. Here you have violated your own personal standards and desires. You didn't eat perfectly. You didn't look the way you wanted. The resulting feelings mimic guilt and, again, self-atonement blood seems like the only answer.

**“They are right; I deserve this.”**

If self-injurers were sinned against by others, their behavior can be a way to agree with or approve of what was done to them: “Yes, you hurt me because I *deserve* to be hurt.” Self-injurers hurt themselves before someone else can.

**“I am angry.”**

Anger is frequently a message in self-injury. It can be a more aggressive way of saying, “I am guilty and deserve to be punished,” but it often includes anger toward another person. Instead of hurting this person or taking the anger out on the family dog, the self-injurer hits him- or herself. “I hate you,” is the refrain, but the focus of rage switches from self to others and back again.

**“I can’t feel this way any longer; hurting myself is the only way to stop my feelings.”**

When emotions seem overwhelming, you want them to stop. You *need* them to stop. Otherwise, they will kill you, drive you insane, or compel you to do something you desperately want to avoid. Self-injury temporarily relieves the pain, focuses your attention on the present, and leaves you feeling that you have regained control.

**“I feel out of control (and other people have been in control). This way I can gain control (and no one can stop me).”**

When self-injurers can find words, they often speak about “control.”

**“Words cannot express my pain.”**

Human beings usually put experience into language. Emotions need to be communicated. But what if there are no words? In that case, self-injury reflects a soul seeking expression. It may not be articulate or precise, but self-injury somehow captures the internal experience.

**“Help!”**

Some self-injurers want to keep their behavior a secret. It adds to the meaning of the ritual. But many want help and don't know how to ask. Perhaps they have never asked; perhaps they are too proud; perhaps they think no one cares enough to help.

If a person is hurting himself as a way to ask for help, it raises other questions. For example, why would you choose a private, harmful behavior to ask for something? Some spouses test their mates by wanting something from them without telling them what it is. They think, “If