

Self-Injury

It's called many things -- self-inflicted violence, self-injury, self-harm, parasuicide, delicate cutting, self-abuse and self-mutilation. **Self-injury is the act of attempting to alter a mood state by inflicting physical harm serious enough to cause tissue damage to one's body.** Approximately 4% of the United States population uses physical self-injury as a way of dealing with overwhelming feelings or situations, often using it to speak when no words will come. People who self-harm come from all different backgrounds. They are men, women, rich, poor, gay, straight, old and young.

People who self-harm often feel that they are in an invalidating environment. They will often go to great lengths to cover up what they have done to themselves. There is also a great deal of shame associated with self-injury.

The level and seriousness of self-injury varies. The most common means is cutting and burning. Other forms of self-injury include:

- Scratching
- Branding
- Burning/abrasions
- Biting
- Bruising
- Hitting

It is important for parents to be aware of the warning signs and symptoms of people who self-injure. Some of these signs are:

- Wearing long sleeve clothing all year long
- Being withdrawn
- Lack of interest
- Inability to explain scars or other marks

Even though there is the possibility that a self-inflicted injury may result in life-threatening damage, self-injury is *not* suicidal behavior. You may be wondering why someone would intentionally harm themselves. The reasons self-injurers give for this behavior vary:

- Self-injury temporarily relieves intense feelings, pressure or anxiety
- Self-injury provides a sense of being real, being alive – of feeling *something*
- Injuring oneself is a way to externalize emotional internal pain – to feel pain on the outside instead of the inside

- Self-injury is a way to break emotional numbness (the self-anesthesia that allows someone to cut without feeling pain)
- Self-abuse is self-soothing behavior for someone who does not have other means to calm intense emotions
- Harming oneself can be a way to draw attention to the need for help, to ask for assistance in an indirect way.

If you know someone who is harming himself or herself it is important for you to be a source of support. Since it is so shameful and secretive it is equally as important for you to not pass judgment. It is very hard to realize that someone you care about is physically harming herself or himself. Your concern may come out in frustration and even comments that can drive the person farther away. Some things that might be helpful are:

- Let her or him know that you care and that you will listen
- Encourage expression of emotions, including anger
- Spend time doing enjoyable activities together
- Offer to help find a therapist or support group
- If you are the parent of a self-injuring child, prepare yourself to address your family's difficulties with expression of feelings, as this is a common factor in self-injury – this is not about blame, but about a learning process that will help the entire family.

Resources:

www.mentalhealthamercia.com

www.self-injury.org

Focus Adolescent Services (410) 341-4216

Alderman, Tracy, *The Scared Soul: Understanding and Ending Self-Inflicted Violence*.