

SELF-HARM BEHAVIOUR OVERVIEW

Definition: Self-injury, also referred to as self-mutilation and self-harm, is a general term for a variety of forms of intentional self-harm without the wish to die. Cutting or picking one's skin, especially the wrist area, with sharp objects is one of the most common patterns of self-mutilation. Others include biting, hitting or bruising oneself; picking or pulling at skin or hair; burning oneself with lighted cigarettes, or in the worst scenarios, amputating parts of the body.

One of the characteristics of those with self-injury behaviour is that most are women, and that many adult self-injurers have a mental health illness, usually depression or a personality disorder. Teenagers on the other hand often get swept up into the copy-cat nature of cutting and there is not always a mental illness connected with it.

Causes and symptoms: Several different theories have been proposed to explain self-mutilation:

- Self-injury is an outlet for strong emotions that the person knows no other way of expressing.
- Self-injury relieves unbearable tension or anxiety. Many self-mutilators do report feeling relief after self-injury behaviour.
- Self-injury triggers the body's biochemical responses to pain. Stress and trauma release endorphins, which are the body's natural pain-killing substances.
- Self-injury is attention seeking behaviour. This may be true for those who do not attempt to hide the behaviour.

For those not seeking attention the signs of self-injury could include wearing long-sleeved or baggy clothing, even in hot weather. Self-injurers are often hesitant to change their clothes or undress around others.

Treatment

The guiding factor in treatment is whether the person *wants* help. If the desire is there to change behaviour, therapists who specialize in self-injury behaviour are often able to help the person gain insight and new coping skills. Although there are no medications specifically for self-mutilation, if the person is depressed, antidepressants are often given as well.