

SELF-INJURY BEHAVIOUR OVERVIEW

Definition: Self-injury refers to deliberate, low-lethality bodily harm, carried out to reduce psychological distress, without the intent of suicide. Self-injury can take many forms, including cutting or picking one's skin with sharp objects, burning, biting, hitting or bruising oneself, pulling out one's hair, head-banging and self-choking.

The current estimate in North America is that one percent of the population engages in self-injury. Studies focusing specifically on the adolescent population have indicated prevalence as high as 18 percent. While there is no pattern or profile for self-injurers, studies suggest that more females than males are engaging in this behaviour. In some cases, self-injury co-occurs with a mental health issue.

Causes and symptoms: A person may engage in self-injury for a variety of reasons:

- Self-injury provides relief from intense, unpleasant emotions such as anger, frustration, depression, loneliness and invalidation.
- Self-injury provides stimulation when one feels emotionally numb or is in a state of dissociation (mind-body disconnection).
- Self-injury may be utilized as a form of self-punishment when one feels worthless, unworthy of being loved, or bad.

Many self-injurers report feeling an immediate sense of relief after engaging in the behaviour. This is in part due to the fact that self-injury triggers the body's biochemical responses to pain. Stress and trauma release endorphins, which are the body's natural pain-killing substances. Endorphins serve to help one feel calm and in control. Furthermore, self-injury may serve to communicate what the individual is unable to put into words.

Caregivers may view self-injury as attention-seeking or manipulative behaviour. Certainly, young people may experiment and get caught up in the copy cat nature of self-injury. Education needs to occur so that young people understand the dangers behind this kind of experimentation. When self-injury becomes a means of coping for an adolescent, caregivers must strive to remember that self-injury is the expression of an underlying issue. Individuals will need calm, non-judgemental, validating support in order to develop alternative, healthy ways of coping. In many cases professional counselling will be necessary.

Treatment

The guiding factor in treatment is whether the person *wants* help. Harm reduction approaches can be used to assist a person who is not yet ready to give up self-injury. If the desire is there to move past self-injury, therapists who specialize in this subject are often able to help the person gain insight and new coping skills. Self-injury groups can also be a powerful agent for change. Although there are no medications specifically for self-injury, if an individual is depressed, antidepressants may be prescribed.