

6 Answers to Questions About Self-Harming Every One Should Know

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What is it?

Self-harming is the deliberate damaging of one's own body tissue in the absence of any intent to die. Self-harming is primarily cutting and burning on parts of the body such as hands, wrists, arms, stomach, and thighs. However, self-harm is any means of deliberately causing injury to one's body, such as picking on skin, self-biting, pulling out hair, ingesting toxic substances, and over exercising. Both females and males self-harm; 1.5 percent of children between the ages of 5-10, 17 percent of adolescents, 15 percent of college students and 5 percent of adults have been reported to self-harm.

Why do they do it?

Self-harming is a method of expressing distress, a way of communicating a need for help, a form of releasing pain; it can also provide a sense of control and can act as a distraction or suppression of painful emotions. Individuals who have reported self-harming describe the act as a means of feeling something rather than feeling numb. Both emotional and physical pain are processed in the same areas of the brain. In effect, when someone elects to self-harm and the physical pain lessens so does the emotional pain. An important feature of self-harming is that endorphins are released into the body when pain is registered by the brain. Endorphins are neurotransmitters which deliver pain relief and provides an individual a kind of euphoria, such as a "runner's high".

If it feels good, why is it bad?

Self-harming is a maladaptive coping device that has been reported to be addictive. Self-harming could also have lasting and damaging physical effects such as scarring, infection, nerve damage and hair loss. Self-harming can also lead to overdosing and poisoning. Psychologically, self-harming evokes distress on its own, such as irritability, feelings of loneliness, shame, guilt and stress all of which could complicate the underlying issues. The benefits of self-harming are temporary, and the emotional pain will return.

How can I tell if my child is self-harming?

Noticeable signs to look for are cuts, scrapes, bite marks, burn marks and bald spots. Doctors, teachers and friends may notice some of these injuries. Repeatedly having excuses for injuries, wearing long sleeves and pants in warm weather, scratching, isolating, and finding sharp objects in their possession are also signs of self-harm.

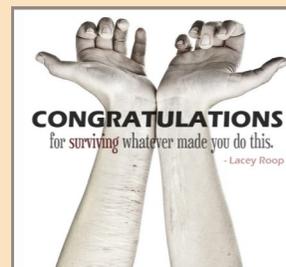
How do we treat it?

Psychological counseling and sometimes medication are recommended to treat self-harm. The recommended counseling technique for treatment of self-harming is still being studied; however, dialectical behavioral, motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral and family therapy have all shown the most potential in achieving positive results.

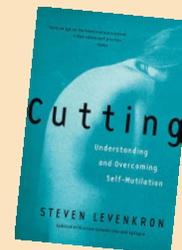
How do we prevent it?

If self-harming is a means of coping with distress, then enhancing positive coping skills would be a form of prevention. Seeking help for the underlying issues at onset would prevent the need to find relief at such extreme measures. Individuals who self-harm score high on measures of loneliness therefore, maintaining relationships and socializing is key in prevention. Positive and consistent dialogue regarding mental health and help-seeking have been linked to effective suicide prevention. In other words, the more often a person hears that reporting self-harm is a positive act, the more likely they will report it.

Food for thought:



Reading Suggestions:



1-800-SUICIDE

Hotline for people contemplating suicide.

1-800-334-HELP

Self injury Foundation's 24-hour national crisis line.

1-877-332-7333

Real Help for Teens' help line

1-800-273-TALK

A 24-hour crisis hotline if you're about to self-harm or are in an emergency situation.