

Understanding Self Injury- FAQs

What is self-injury?—self injury, self-harm, self mutilation, all the same

Self-injury covers a lot of different things. It includes all the different ways that you can physically hurt yourself. Self-injury falls on a continuum with some things being more socially acceptable than others. For example, smoking, drugs or excessive alcohol use are really forms of self injury in that they cause physical damage to your body, however, parts of society have decided that these things are more acceptable. Piercings and tattoos would be considered a bit more self-injurious but still acceptable to a large part of society. What is more traditionally referred to as self-injury can include cutting, burning, picking scabs, pulling hair, over dosing, banging your head, punching walls and even breaking bones. Eating disorders are also a form of self-injury. Most people who self-injure use multiple methods. They are usually very good at hiding the results or explaining them away. Self-injury is an addiction. Everyone does something that could be considered to be self-injury by this broad definition. It is just that society finds some methods more acceptable than other ones.

How common is self-injury?

Self-injury is much more common than people realize, especially among teens. We are seeing an increase in people coming to the Centre who self-injure and we know that there are many more people out there who are not seeking help or are seeking help elsewhere. We hope that by providing this information more people will seek help.

Who self-injures?

Just about anyone, in any walk of life, can be a self-abuser. Self-abuse affects people from every socio-economic, ethnic and religious background and all ages from childhood throughout adulthood. It is a coping mechanism used more often by females in part because males tend to use more “acceptable” forms of self-injury like punching walls. Women are generally not socialized to express their violence externally and as a result when some women are faced with tension, they take it out on themselves. Because of the types of self-injury they choose (i.e. cutting, burning, etc.), women’s self-abuse tends to be less acceptable (although no less harmful). Also, women tend to seek treatment more than men in general.

Risk Factors and Personal Profile

There are many things that can bring someone to self-injure, on the other hand, a person may experience several risk factors and not self-injure. There is evidence that some people begin to self-injure because they “copy-cat” others. However, they may quickly find that it is difficult to stop once it is started. Some risk factors include:

- abuse (verbal, physical, sexual)
- loss of a significant person
- childhood illness and surgery
- peer conflict
- family violence
- relationship problems
- feelings of lack of control
- feelings of depression
- feelings of anxiety
- anger, guilt and shame
- impulse control problems
- perfectionistic

Why do people self-injure?

This is a complicated question because there are a lot of differences between people, but in general self-injury is a coping strategy. It's harmful, but it may be effective for some individuals, at least in the short term. Usually there is some intense emotion that the person feels they cannot handle like anger, frustration or severe depression. It may be a way to show people how much they hurt on the inside, a way to feel "real" and alive, or a way to feel in control. Self-injury may make the person feel better, but soon after they begin to feel guilty, or they regret it because they have to wear long sleeves in the summer, or know that they will have scars. Self-abuse is a behaviour that exchanges short-term relief in exchange for long-term harm.

Why don't people seek help?

Many people who self-injure don't tell anyone. They feel ashamed or embarrassed or don't think anything can be done to help them. Even worse, some people seek help only to find a doctor or a counsellor who does not understand. Help is available, so if you self-injure or know someone who does, seek out a counsellor or doctor who has dealt with people who self-injure.

Common Beliefs About Self-Injury

Self-injury is a failed suicide attempt.

False, self-injury is often a way to continue living and cope with whatever is going on in their life without having to attempt suicide. This does not mean that all cuts to the wrist are not suicide attempts, but most people who self-injure know exactly how deep they can cut before they risk dying. There is a risk that self-injury may also result in an unintentional suicide by accident. Also, this does not mean that self-injury never triggers feelings of suicide and many self-abusers feel very suicidal at times and may have made attempt in the past. Just because it is not a form of suicide doesn't make it any less serious or less dangerous a choice.

Self-injury is "attention seeking" behaviour.

OK, now think about this one, aren't there better ways to get attention? One could dye their hair blue or walk around naked! Self-injury is a coping strategy and usually one that involves covering it up, not showing it off. Self-injury is a sign of distress. It can be considered a form of "communication". It can be a way to show people that they need help or that they hurt inside.

Self-injury is untreatable. It's hopeless.

False. The problem is that many people, even professionals, don't understand self-injury and it seems so foreign to their way of thinking that they can't think of anyway to help. The key is to look at why not how. There are services available for treating self-injury. You may need to look around to find someone who understands but they are out there. Places to obtain treatment might include crisis centres, sexual abuse treatment centres, children's mental health centres or women's centres.

It's Borderline Personality Disorder or they're "Borderline".

False. Self-injury is not sufficient for a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder which requires five of nine criteria, of which self-injury is only one symptom. Again, this label is an easy way for some professionals to describe what they don't understand. Self-injury is a symptom of a bigger problem not a diagnosis.

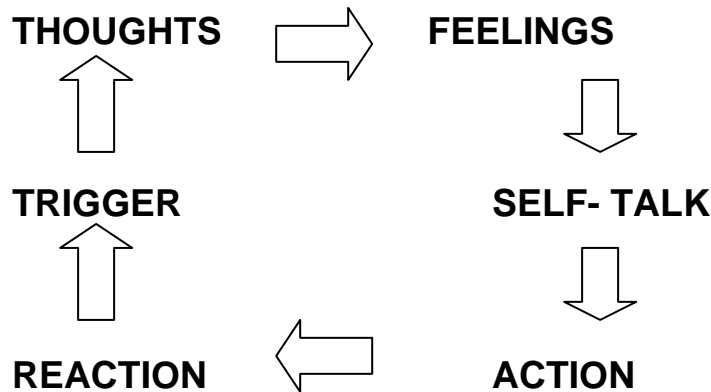
It's my mother's/father's/friend's fault. They made me do it.

False. Self-injury is not someone else's fault. To self-abuse or not is a choice and choice is a personal responsibility, therefore ending abuse is a personal responsibility. People in their life may trigger them but they still have choices as to what to do with those feelings.

How to start to treat someone who self-injures?

1. Establish the context. Provide a sense of hope that it can get better, and acceptance.
2. Discuss boundaries and guidelines (be boringly predictable).
3. Stay in the present. Until you have good self-soothing, self-talk and have the self-injury better under control, avoid memories that can increase self-injury. Get the skills first.
4. Teach self-soothing, distraction and other coping techniques (warm baths, coffee with a friend, play with a puppy etc.). Give the person new ways of solving problems. Give an understanding of self-abuse and how it became so important.
5. Do not get into control battles. They are immediately painful and ultimately futile. It is not possible for one person to "make" another person do something or stop doing something.
6. Practice, practice, practice.

A Model for Understanding Self-Injury



Points of Intervention in the Self-injury Cycle

1. Triggers: Triggers are feelings, smells, events, memories, thoughts, and reactions of others that increase tension. A trigger “lights a fuse.” It takes a variable amount of time for that fuse to burn down to an explosion. The key is to learn to have a longer fuse so that they can slow down their reaction. Deal with them as soon as possible when they come up, do not “stuff” or avoid them. (When does it happen? What is going on? What are the circumstances?)
2. Thoughts: Identify cognitive distortions (i.e. overgeneralizations, black and white thinking, catastrophizing etc...) and help challenge those distortions. (What were you thinking? Was it distorted?)
3. Feelings/Emotions: Learn to identify feelings, learn to tolerate them (i.e. happiness may be frightening), learn to use feelings as information about yourself and the world around you such as sadness indicates loss and anger indicates a threat. (What feelings did you have in response to the trigger? Mad? Sad? Scared?)
4. Self-Talk: Identify self-talk statements, messages from childhood etc... and change them into more constructive or supportive self-talk statements. (What did you say to yourself? What do you say when things go well? When they go poorly? What do you believe about yourself?)
5. Actions: Generate 5 actions, choose 1 and implement it. Leave self-injury on the list as long as they want it there. It’s always an option. (What alternatives did you have? What choice did you make? Was it self-abusive?)
6. Reaction: Reflect on the outcome (Was it a good choice? Did it work? Have you been here before? What did you do with it? How could you change it?)

Bottom Line: Do you really need to hurt yourself? Does it really help? Does it really solve the problem?

Coping Strategies

Things to consider in choosing a coping strategy:

- Will this activity hurt my body, my health, or my safety?
- Will this activity make it harder for me to cope without extra help?
- Will this activity tend to make people get angry or frustrated with me or want me to go away?

Make a list of alternative coping strategies and have him or her keep it where the razors/matches/etc are located. Some ideas might include:

- Go to a park and swing on a swing.
- Find someone to talk to that you trust.
- Journal or write poetry.
- Sing as loud as you can.
- Play with a child.
- Take deep breaths.
- Watch your favourite funny movie.
- Spend time with friends.

- Carry safe things with you like charms, tones or crystals.
- Go on-line.
- Rip paper or material such as rags.
- Find something to do with your hands and brain, little electronic games work great because they are portable.
- Soak in a tub with bubble bath (remove all sharps first if this is a trigger).
- As a second-last resort (because it is close to cutting) you can take a red felt tip pen and mark your arms as you would with a sharp. Be careful with this one as it works for some people but not for others so try some other things first.
- Leave self-injury at the bottom of the list for a long as you need to. For many people it remains an option for years after they have stopped self-injuring.
- Make a “feel better kit” when you are in a more cheerful mood. It can include anything healthy (i.e. not self-abusive) that makes you feel better, such as a funny movie, journal, photos, bubble bath, music, chocolate, favourite blanket or stuffed animal, etc.

Time Frame

It is estimated that persons who self-injure will take many years to stop and will likely have to make several attempts (just like smoking it is a very hard habit to quit.) Many will go from one form of self-injury to another (i.e. cutting to an eating disorder to drug abuse etc...)

If You Self-Injure and Want To Stop

Why should you stop?

- Self-abuse causes damage to the body.
- Self-injury distracts from solving problems and creates additional problems with family and friends.
- It blocks learning better ways of calming and soothing painful emotions.

Things to consider in choosing a coping strategy:

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- Will this activity make it harder for me to cope without extra help?
- Will this activity tend to make people get angry or frustrated with me or want me to go away?

Things that may help you to stop

- Find someone to talk to that you trust. Know that they may not understand right away so you'll need to explain it to them and give them time to adjust. (See [How to tell someone that you self-injure.](#))
- Make a list of alternative coping strategies and keep it where you keep your razors/matches/etc. Some ideas might include:
 - Go to a park and swing on a swing.
 - Journal or write poetry.
 - Sing as loud as you can.
 - Play with a child.
 - Take deep breaths.
 - Watch your favourite funny movie.
 - Spend time with friends.
 - Carry safe things with you like charms, stones or crystals.
 - Find something to do with your hands and brain, little electronic games work great because they are portable.
 - Go on-line.
 - Rip paper or material such as rags.
 - Soak in a tub with bubble bath (remove all sharps first if this is a trigger).
 - As a second-last resort (because it is close to cutting) you can take a red felt tip pen and mark your arms as you would with a sharp. Be careful with this one as it works for some people but not for others so try some other things first.
 - Leave self-injury at the bottom of the list for as long as you need to. For many people it remains an option for years after they have stopped self-injuring.
- Make a "feel better kit" when you are in a good mood. It can include anything that makes you feel better such as a funny movie, journal, photos, bubble bath, music, chocolate, favourite blanket or stuffed animal, etc.
- Think about the times when you get triggered to self injure. Is there anything that you can change about those situations or your reactions to them? It isn't something that "just happens." What were you thinking about yourself? What were you feeling? What were you saying to yourself? Use this information the next time you are in a similar situation.

- Be aware of your triggers. Triggers are feelings, smells, events, memories, thoughts, reactions of others, etc. which increase tension. A trigger lights a “fuse” and one way to work on self-abuse is to work on lengthening that fuse. The longer the fuse the more time you have to implement another coping strategy. Knowing your triggers can help you plan to avoid self-abuse.
- Try to respond to the situation rather than react.
- Remember, self-injury is always a choice and it is always your choice. No one makes you do it, so don't blame it on others. Other people may trigger you but ultimately the final choice of what you do is up to you. Be responsible for your choices.
- If you take medication and have a tendency to overdose as a form of self-abuse work with your pharmacist to dose only 2 to 7 days at a time.
- Remove sharps from convenient places (i.e. take razors out of the shower) if you tend to cut.
- Remember the AA formula of “HALT,” you'll be more likely to self-injure when you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired.
- Seek counselling. Having a friend you can talk to is great but sometimes you may need professional help or an outside opinion. We know how hard it can be to open up to a stranger but you will need to use as many resources as you can. Self-injury is a very hard habit to break.
- Don't look at stopping self-injury as the most important goal in treatment. Usually there are many buried issues or feelings that will need to be explored which may trigger feelings that you can't deal with by any of the other methods on your list.
- It takes a long time to be ready to give up self-injuring. Even putting it off for a half an hour can be looked at as an accomplishment, especially since that half hour will give you a chance to talk yourself down or try another coping strategy.

How to Tell Someone That You Self-Injure

Telling people that you self injure is scary. You don't know how they will react. In a way, it can be viewed as similar to coming out as gay or lesbian. Although it is very common, it may not be considered "acceptable" to others. Be careful whom you choose to tell. Choose someone you really trust. You can disclose in a conversation or in a letter that you present to them or by e-mail. If you choose the last two be ready to follow it up with a chat session or phone call. Keep these points in mind:

- Be willing to give the person some time to digest what you have told them. You may have caught them by surprise and first reactions are not always the best indicators of their feelings. Give them some space, but be ready for their questions.
- Be as open as you can and give them as much information as you can. The challenge with Internet sites is that they often include graphic details that can be very scary. There are several good books. You can contact a local mental health agency for more information. People are afraid of things that they don't understand.
- Try to anticipate what questions they might ask. If they ask you something that you are not ready to talk about yet, tell them that.
- Realize that it can be as difficult for them to hear what you have to say, as it is for you to say it. Anyone that you are that close to will not want you to hurt, and will want to help. They may wonder where they went wrong and feel guilty that they did not notice. Be sure to tell them that this is a choice you made and you were not ready for their help earlier but need it now.
- You do not have to accept their value judgements about your self-injury.
- Let the person know you are telling them because you trust them, not because you are trying to punish, manipulate or guilt-trip them.
- Never tell someone in anger. ("You made me cut/burn/hit.") Do not blame the person for their behaviours, which may have triggered you or for not seeing your pain. They'll get defensive and angry. You want their understanding not their guilt and besides self-injury is always your choice.
- If you have a friend or a counsellor that you trust you may want them to be present to give you support, but do not expect them to tell the other person for you.
- It's usually best to avoid graphic descriptions of your injuries. You are not trying to freak them out. They probably don't need a techni-colour description of your worst incident. If they have any questions later then you can give them the details in another conversation once they have had a chance to absorb what you told them.

If You Want to Help Someone Who Self-Injures

- The most important thing that they need is your acceptance, support and love.
- Listen to them.
- Understand that the person is in pain and is trying to cope with it the best that they can.
- Understand that the self-injury is helping them deal with life right now.
- You cannot stop the person from self-injuring and are not responsible if they do. It is a choice that that person made about how to deal with a situation. Power struggles are futile.
- Educate yourself about why people self injure so that you can try to understand.
- Encourage them to seek professional help, perhaps offer to call around and ask if services have someone skilled in dealing with people who self-injure.