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# When Emotions BLEED

## Understanding Cutting and Self Injury

**B**y the time I get to my room, my heart is pounding and I have the shakes. I can't focus on anything else until I have the razor in my hand and have marked the first cut. I flinch at first, but feel immediately relieved at the sight of blood. There is just something so satisfying about the pressure of the blade going through layers and layers of my skin. The pain allows me to feel and to forget the problems of my life as they fade and I feel like I'm floating. The shame I feel afterwards is shadowed by the relief and sense of calm I'm now experiencing. I feel like I can handle anything, as long as I have the ability to cut myself.

The above statement was taken from an internet message board for people who engage in self injury (SI.) Other members who post on the site explain that the scars on their arms and thighs map the obstacles they've overcome in their lives.

### WHAT SI IS (AND ISN'T)

"Cutting and self injury are a phenomena in which the person feels relief or a release of tension through the pain caused by the harm," says Diana Marshall, a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist at Portage Path Behavioral Health. "A person will attempt to alter his mood state by causing tissue damage to the body. Cutting is only one method. Other forms include burning of the skin with a flame, most often from a lighter or a candle, or carving - involving pencil erasers used to 'burn' carved marks in the skin." Picking

skin, biting, pulling hair out, hitting the body with a hard object, puncturing skin with a needle or pin, and in some cases, breaking bones are other forms of SI.

Marshall emphatically points out that SI is NOT a suicide attempt, as the injuries aren't intended to be fatal. Actions are not considered SI if done for the purpose of:

Sexual Pleasure      Body Decoration  
To Fit In              For Spiritual Enlightenment  
To Be Cool and Get Attention

Areas most affected by the injuries usually include the arms, legs and abdomen, anywhere that is easy to reach and simple to disguise with clothing.

### THOSE WHO HARM THEMSELVES

Self injury was previously thought to be an activity among teenage girls. While the activity does typically begin in the teen years and there is a higher incidence in women, SI can occur in any socioeconomic background, education level, or gender. More recent studies and anecdotal evidence even suggest that the incidence rate is similar in males, but they are less likely to seek support and it remains hidden.

One common thread generally held by those who self injure is a history of abuse (physical, emotional or sexual.) Researchers Van der Kolk, Perry and Herman (1991) found that physical abuse, emotional neglect and chaotic family conditions during childhood were reliable predictors of future cutting.; however, not all who were abused self injure, and vice versa.

Marshall points out that trauma survivors and substance abusers also are at risk for self injury. "Most have issues with their self esteem and experience guilt and feelings of worthlessness, and they have difficulty expressing their feelings," she explains.

Often, those who SI are high achievers, perfectionists, even. They put a great deal of pressure on themselves and feel the need to relieve it.

(continued)

## When Emotions Bleed *(continued)*

### HURTING OR HELPING: WHY THEY DO IT

The website for Self Injury & Related Issues (SIARI) explains that there are a variety of reasons why people SI. One reason is about control. Often those who SI feel out of control of their lives, and through self harm, they control the depth, length and amount of wounds - one of the few things they feel they *can* control.

Another reason people self injure is that they feel numb inside. By inflicting harm, they are able to feel *something* - pain. One woman described it as “a way to know that this is where I am and that I am still alive.”

“One trigger for self harm is usually an increase in stress, but this includes positive stress as well,” states Marshall. “A new job, new school, new relationship - it’s not just limited to negative stressors. It’s a way to use physical pain to deal with emotional pain.”

Finally, some will harm themselves as punishment for “being worthless”, “not good enough”, or for a perceived failure.

### SELF INJURY AS PART OF SOMETHING LARGER

Researchers at the St. Louis Behavioral Institute agree that self injury is maladaptive coping method and it is a frequent companion to a variety of other disorders, including substance abuse, depression, post traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, anxiety disorders and dissociative disorders.

Some people will use self injury to disguise the symptoms of these other disorders. In others, the disorders develop in conjunction with, or even as a result of the self harm behavior, as feelings of guilt and shame increase.

Experts say it is an addictive behavior because it works. Almost immediately, the sight of blood or the feeling of pain releases the pent up tension that the patient felt before the harm occurred.

By treating the underlying issues of the behavior and the real root of why they are performing it, people can gain freedom from harming themselves.

### PLANNING FOR TREATMENT

It is difficult for anyone to get help and due to the addictive nature

of self injury, it’s even harder to want to stop. However, if you or someone you know is considering treatment, there are several questions that a person should ask themselves before talking to his or her doctor.

- *Would you accept counseling from a trained professional?*
- *Would you be willing to take anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medications?*
- *Would you be willing to take time off from work/school on doctor’s orders?*
- *Would you accept the involvement of your family or friends?*
- *Would you accept outpatient counseling?*
- *Would you be willing to be an inpatient at a clinic?*

Often times, those who self injury will decide to seek treatment, but fear the first step of talking to a general practitioner. In these situations, the self injurer does not always need to talk specifically about their behavior to the doctor. All that is necessary is an explanation of their current emotions: that they feel depressed, anxious or fearful, confused, in despair, or overwhelmed. A referral is usually made based on these emotional struggles.

### WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE?

Self injury treatment emphasizes learning more effective coping skills and their practical application to everyday events. Treatment can be conducted in two forms: individual and group. Both types are equally valid; however, in group therapy, self injurers have the benefit of learning from the experiences of others in the group.

“Intensive behavioral treatments are most effective,” Marshall adds. “In conjunction with cognitive therapy, the treatment helps the person change negative thought patterns and the destructive behaviors that occur as a result of that thinking.”

In addition, self injurers should never be forced into treatment. They have to want it for the therapy to be effective.

Family members should be supportive and remember that recovery is a process and the behavior takes time to stop, says Marshall. “Relapses do sometimes occur, but look at the overall improvement when judging recovery - cutting less, making fewer cuts, being able to admit they’ve cut again and need to talk.” **IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW ENGAGES IN SI AND YOU WANT MORE INFORMATION, CALL PORTAGE PATH AT 330-253-3100. HELP IS AVAILABLE.**



## Are you ready to tell your loved ones about your SI? Here's how.

- Be sensitive to their feelings. It can almost be as hard for them to hear as it is for you to tell. They probably are wondering what they did wrong.
- Explain that coming out is an act of love. You decided to tell them because you love them and trust them and need their support.
- Pick a private place and a time.
- Consider enlisting a third party who understands SI and can keep things calm.
- Be willing and prepared to answer their questions. Try to anticipate what these will be in advance (treatment options, how they can help).
- Don't use your SI as a weapon (ex: “look what you made me do!”)
- Provide as much information as you can. The more they know, the less they will fear.
- Don't bring up the most disturbing aspects of your SI in the first conversation. Wait until the initial shock has worn off.
- Trust your own judgment, do what feels natural to you.
- Remember that communication goes both ways.

# How Loved Ones Can Show Support

- adapted from the research of Jan Sutton & Deb Martison, authors of "Understanding the Cycle of Self Injury"



**Be supportive without reinforcing.** Let them know that you can separate who they are from what they do and that you love them regardless.

**Don't avoid the subject of self injury (SI).** Be willing to talk, but follow the other person's lead.

**Make the initial approach.** Try saying "I know that sometimes you hurt yourself and I'd like to understand it. I'd be grateful if you could help me." Don't push after that.

**Set reasonable limits,** such as "I cannot handle talking to you while you are actually cutting yourself because I care about you greatly and it hurts too much to see you doing it."

**Provide distraction** if necessary. Don't ignore their feelings, but try to distract them from depression or anger. Something such as taking them a flower can brighten their day. This is a simple "improve the moment" technique, not a permanent cure.

If you live apart from the person you are concerned about, **offer a physical safe space.** "Would you want to stay at my house tonight?" Even if the offer is declined, just knowing it is available can be comforting.

**Don't ask "Is there anything I can do?"** Find the things you can do and instead ask "May I?" Often, SIs won't be able to think of anything that could help them, even though helping with their chores can be enough to release the pressure.

**Take care of yourself.** If you are completely supportive of someone else, you will burn out and not be able to help them. Be careful not to be too distant and help them understand that you are not abandoning them.

**Understand your own feelings.** Be honest with yourself about how your loved one's SI makes you feel.

**Know that ultimatums do not work. Ever.** You can't force them to behave as you want. Strip searches will only lead to more hidden places of abuse. Confiscating tools leads to more creative methods of self injury. Punishments only feed the cycle of self hatred and unpleasantness, as does guilt tripping.

# COMMON MYTHS ABOUT SELF INJURY

- adapted from [www.youthnoise.com](http://www.youthnoise.com)

**THE WOUND ISN'T THAT BAD, THEREFORE THE PROBLEM ISN'T THAT SERIOUS.** You CAN'T judge the seriousness of a person's emotional distress by the severity of a self-inflicted wound.

**PEOPLE WHO SELF INJURE ARE "WACKO" AND SHOULD BE CHECKED INTO AN INSTITUTION.** Self injury is a result of overpowering emotions and a loss of self control. Placing someone who feels this way in an institution would only decrease their feeling of self control.

**PEOPLE WHO SELF INJURE ARE JUST TRYING TO GET ATTENTION.** SI-ers may need attention, but they aren't hurting themselves to get it. In fact, most try to hide their wounds & scars.

**THOSE WHO SI ARE JUST TRYING TO MANIPULATE OTHERS.** While some may, it is generally not the case.

**THOSE WHO SELF INJURE POSE A DANGER TO OTHERS.** Self harm is a private activity and it is not about harming others.

**PEOPLE WHO SI DO NOT FEEL THE PAIN.** For some, the pain may not be felt immediately or during the actual process of self injury, but they definitely feel it after the fact.

**SELF INJURY IS A PERSONALITY DISORDER.** Self injury is not something that a doctor diagnoses. However, it is often a symptom of a personality disorder, but not all people with a personality disorder self harm and vice versa.

**ONLY TEENAGE GIRLS SELF INJURE.** All sorts of people feel out of control sometimes and don't know how to cope.

**SELF INJURY IS A SUICIDE ATTEMPT THAT FAILED.** They are using self injury as a way to deal with difficult emotions, to either validate that they are still alive, or use the pain to cover emotional pain.



**Community Pathways** is a publication of **Portage Path Behavioral Health**, with outpatient facilities in Akron, Barberton, and Cuyahoga Falls/Stow, and psychiatric emergency services in Akron.

Portage Path is an affiliate of the **County of Summit Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board.**

For more information about the topics covered in this issue, call (330) 376-6144.

To make a referral, call (330) 253-3100.

For 24-hour/7-day **Psychiatric Emergency Services**, call (330) 762-6110.

To reach the **Support Hotline**, call (330) 434-9144.

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## Should you seek help for your self injury?

The answer is yes, if you...

- feel numb inside and hurt yourself to make sure you can still feel,
  - strongly dislike yourself and feel worthless,
- are tired of hiding your scars and wounds from your loved ones,
- are tired of making excuses for your injuries,
- pick at scabs to give yourself a feeling of comfort,
- hurt yourself because feeling the pain makes your other problems go away.

IF YOU (OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW) ANSWERED YES TO ANY OF THE ABOVE QUESTIONS OR SELF INJURES IN ANY WAY AND YOU WOULD LIKE INFORMATION ABOUT TREATMENT, TELLING LOVED ONES, OR HELPING A LOVED ONE COPE WITH SELF INJURY, PLEASE CALL PORTAGE PATH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AT 330-253-3100. HELP IS AVAILABLE!

### How you can help yourself

Self injury can become just as addictive as any drug or alcohol. It takes time to beat any addiction. Here is a list of activities to try instead of injuring your body.

IF YOU FEEL MAD, FRUSTRATED, OR RESTLESS, TRY AN ACTIVITY THAT IS VIOLENT, BUT NOT TOWARDS YOURSELF OR OTHERS, such as:

- Hit a punching bag or a pillow
- Shred newspapers or old phone books
- Cut or smash play-doh
- Break sticks
- Throw ice against a wall

IF YOU FEEL UNREAL OR HAVE A CRAVING SENSATION, TRY AN ACTIVITY TO GIVE YOU A QUICK PHYSICAL REACTION, LIKE:

- Put your finger in a glass of ice water for one minute
- Bite into a jalapeno
- Snap a rubber band on your wrist
- Stomp your foot on the ground