

Cutting and Self-Injury is Never 'No Big Deal'

“Cutting,” burning, head banging, gouging at your skin are all forms of self-injury, which I will refer to as SI for the purposes of this post. SI behaviors are basically impulse control issues. When a person is experiencing negative feelings, the need to alleviate the emotional pain is a normal response, but when these feelings are perceived as being “too much to handle” or are overwhelming, then the impulse to get rid of these feelings NOW can lead to SI behaviors.

There are some who SI because they feel too numb, and the pain caused by the act of SI can be a welcome counter-balance to not feeling anything at all. If this describes you, you may feel “detached” as though you are outside of your body looking in. Things often don’t seem real. This is a form of dissociation, and the chemicals released from SI can give the person the sense that they are back in their body.

If you are cutting yourself, you may have experienced trauma sometime in your life. What we know is that child abuse, sexual, physical or emotional abuse leads to changes in your brain and your nervous system. Many teens that have experienced abuse or have had significant losses i.e. death of parent or best friend, divorce, find it more difficult to “regulate” their emotional states than those that have not had past trauma in their life. It’s not your fault. You did not bring these changes upon yourself. BUT, you do need help. It’s not

easy to stop SI once you have started. “Why is that?” you may ask.

In response to physical pain, the brain releases endogenous opioids, basically “feel good” chemicals to protect you from the pain. If we are in danger or our life is being threatened and we are injured, we need to act, so our brain has this way of making sure we can harness enough energy to get out of harm’s way. If we didn’t have this type of chemical protection, we would be immobile and possibly die (if there is a real and present danger). Our species has survived because of this ability. So, cutting changes brain chemistry and the person experiences a sense of “relief” or a “high” from the behavior. The problem is that cutting yourself is not a good long-term solution for managing emotional pain.

For one, the brain reinforces SI behavior as I’ve stated already, so you’ve now limited your options of how to handle negative feelings in different, more creative ways. For instance, exercise has been shown to release these same types of endorphins, and so has physical touch. So, talking to a friend and getting a hug as a form of soothing and social connection can feel just as good. “But what if I don’t have any friends and that IS the problem?” Then you need to talk to an adult you can trust. If you are being bullied and this is one of your problems, I implore you to tell someone. Your feelings of isolation and “aleness” are only contributing to the problem.

Secondly, what works at first to relieve your emotional pain starts working less and less and you need to do more and more of it to get the same results. What starts as a habit can

become addictive and the brain is meanwhile reinforcing the behavior. Think about what you know of drinking, drug use and addiction.

Thirdly, SI isn't a socially acceptable way of expressing pain, so the person who is "cutting" is even more of a pariah and less likely to feel understood or to want to reach out for fear of being judged. Maybe you've heard others say, "You're just doing this to get attention." For the majority of people who are cutting, nothing could be further from the truth. They often wear long sleeves even in the summer, or wristbands and bracelets to hide cuts on their arms. This isn't the only place I've seen people SI before, but it's probably the most common. And along with SI not being understood by many for what it is...a cry for help; it scares the crap out of people...especially adults. Here's a list of 5 things to keep in mind if you know someone who is self-injuring:

1. If you have a friend who is cutting, don't think that it's "cool." It's not "cool" and it IS a big deal no matter what she says.
2. Don't you start doing it too. This behavior can become "contagious" if no one is taking it seriously. Your job as her friend is to convince her to get help before it's too late. Remind her that SHE is not the problem, but SI is the problem now. Always keeping in mind that this is the best your friend could do in response to how badly she is feeling.
3. Never judge the person who is cutting. If they could have thought of something more effective and faster acting to relieve their pain, they would have.

4. Encourage them to talk about HOW they are feeling even if they don't know WHY. It's not important to have all the answers. Being able to find solutions to help them cope is much more important.

5. Just because someone is self-injuring doesn't mean they are suicidal. Many people cut to keep from killing themselves.

If you are hurting yourself it's because YOU ARE HURTING INSIDE. If you can't put your finger on what's exactly bothering you now, that's not uncommon with painful experiences from our past. You may have no memories of being hurt or traumatized as a child, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. A professional therapist (and there are those who will work at little or no cost) can help you to sort through your feelings and help you cope in new and more effective ways. In the end you will feel more empowered and will have better self-worth than you will ever get from SI. SI promises you the world and delivers more hurt and pain in the long run. There is help and you are NOT alone.

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