

Self-Injury

a silent scream

Hurting Yourself

Self-injury—also referred to as self-inflicted violence, self-harm, self-mutilation, and self abuse—is deliberately hurting one's own body, without intending to commit suicide.

While few major studies have been done, experts estimate that one percent of the population—about 2 million people—engage in self-injury. A majority of sufferers are young women. They typically begin self-injuring in their teens, and often continue into their thirties. However, boys and men also self-injure, and the practice cuts across all ethnic groups, income levels, and social classes.

Of the many forms of self-destructive behavior—substance abuse, eating disorders, and dangerous risk-taking, to name a few—self-injury is one of the most difficult for people to understand.



For More Information

Go to www.intheknowzone.com for more information about self-injury, with citations and links. Test your understanding with a quick quiz.

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Secret Pain

For people who deliberately hurt themselves, the behavior is a way of coping with overwhelming feelings. When most people get upset, they can go for a walk, have a good cry, or write in a journal. But for people who self-injure, hurting themselves is the only way they can handle the sadness, pain, anger, or numbness they are feeling. It actually helps some people feel better—but only for a short while.

While a few self-injurers may be trying to get attention, most keep their self-injury a secret. They know that ultimately, what they're doing isn't good for them. They feel inadequate, or even freakish, because they can't seem to deal with their feelings in the usual ways. They may also fear extreme reactions from people close to them. This sense of shame makes the self-injurer feel worse about herself—which in turn makes her more likely to do it again.

More About Self-Injury

www.intheknowzone.com/selfinjury

in the know

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How?

The most common methods of self-injury are:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Pricking oneself with needles
- Punching or kicking things, hitting oneself with objects, or head banging, resulting in bruises or broken bones
- Trichotillomania—pulling out hair or eyelashes
- Preventing wounds or scabs from healing



Turning Pain Inside-Out

People who self-injure are generally turning emotional pain into physical pain. For them, this is a way of letting the pain out. When they feel angry at themselves, helpless, hurt, or alone, the only thing that soothes this emotional distress is to cut, burn, or otherwise hurt their own bodies.

Letting out emotions by making pain physical is partly symbolic. But there is most likely a real physical relief as well. After someone cuts herself, for example, the body may release endorphins—brain chemicals that help the body cope with pain. Some experts think the endorphins create a temporary high to which self-injurers become addicted. They may in turn have to injure themselves more severely—making deeper cuts, for example—to get the same calming effect.

emotional pain

Why do some people need to hurt themselves?

There are many different reasons people self-injure. While none of the following reasons is true for everyone, there are a few common themes.



People who self-injure may have grown up in families where they either weren't allowed to get upset, or were punished if they did. If someone isn't allowed to show any signs of being angry or sad, those feelings get trapped inside, where they can build up to dangerous levels. For some people, the feelings become so intense, and the other means of expression are so off-limits, that cutting or hurting themselves is the only way to let their pain out.

For girls, self-injury can be a way of directing feelings of not liking themselves toward one of the sources of that dislike—namely, their own bodies. A significant number of girls who self-injure also suffer from eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia.

Some, though far from all people who self-injure, are victims of abuse. For these people, hurting themselves is both a way to release emotional pain and regain a sense of control. They feel in control by being the source of their own suffering, instead of being someone else's victim.

More About Why

www.intheknowzone.com/selfinjury/why



What should I do?

If you find out, or suspect, that a friend is injuring himself or herself:

- Above all, encourage your friend to talk with an adult he or she trusts, or seek counseling with a mental health professional.
- Don't be judgmental.
- Try to avoid reactions of shock or disgust. Most likely, your friend already feels ashamed of his or her behavior.
- Let your friend know you're there to listen.
- Acknowledge that your friend is doing this because she's in a lot of emotional pain—be supportive.
- Make yourself available. Tell your friend if she gets the urge to self-injure to call you first, so she can tell someone how she is feeling.
- Don't give the person ultimatums, like "I can't be your friend anymore unless you stop."

expression

Resources

Girls and Boys Town National Hotline
1-800-448-3000 (TDD 1-800-448-1833)
Toll-free crisis, resource and referral line,
staffed 24-hours a day.