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Parent and Youth Support Groups

WHAT IS SELF MUTILATION AND OTHER SELF ABUSIVE BEHAVIORS?

Self-Injury (Self-Mutilation) is episodic self-injurious behavior (SIB) is observed among normally developing children and teenagers. Chronic and severe SIB is more common among people with developmental or psychiatric disabilities or other special populations such as prisoners. SIB may be related to specific biological conditions or syndromes. SIB can be used for attention-seeking, self-stimulation, or for communication (to either get or avoid something). Effective intervention programs identify and remedy the cause, and teach replacement behaviors.

Issues: There are several theories as to why people indulge in self-mutilation. One is that it's a control issue. When children are abused, they are in a situation of no control. Their abuser(s) can hurt them any time, and the children are largely (if not completely) powerless to stop it. When the child grows older and is faced with stressful situations, there is often a strong desire/expectation for some sort of pain, since pain is associated with stress in that person's mind. People who have had these associations forced on them frequently cut themselves because this is a pain that satisfies the psychological desire for pain, and is also a pain that the victim can stop. At last the person is in control. And while the cutting itself is harmful and can cause shame and guilt later, I can tell you that the control feels good.

Another theory is that people who were abused as children often have been taught (by their abusers, or by others who have denied the child's experiences as being valid) that they are

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bad people, who should by all rights be punished. Sometimes people like this turn to behaviors like sado-masochism, or bondage-and-dominance in order to get the punishment that they want. Others can't ask others to punish them, so they punish themselves with cutting. A third theory is that cutting is a manifestation of a desire to become physically unattractive. This is often true of girls who are constantly bombarded with messages (overt and subtle) that they are beautiful and therefore desirable. They naturally reason that if they make themselves unattractive, no one will rape them because they will be undesirable. This chain of reasoning can also lead to compulsive eating behaviors that leave the abuse victim overweight and thus outside of what this society calls attractive. Of course, every person is different, and there are many less common theories as to why people are cutters. If a cutter doesn't fit any of the above models, that doesn't mean their situation is fundamentally different or less valid. Also, it is common for more than one of these thought patterns acting in concert to produce some very complicated rationales for self-mutilation. These desires can be quite strong, and often a cutter will not know why s/he indulges in such behavior.

AND...

What is self mutilation?

Self abusive behavior has been called the new-age anorexia. But why and what makes these teens hurt themselves? Called the "new age anorexia," the practice of self-abuse or mutilating behavior is on the rise. It is estimated that one out of every 200 teen girls between the ages of 13 and 19 regularly practice self-abusive behavior with a reported 2



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million cases in the US alone. But why? Why do these teens hurt themselves? To them, it's sacred, it's a secret and it is theirs.

There are several types of self-abusive and mutilating behaviors. They include cutting, burning, wound interference and picking. **Cutting** is just as it sounds. The teen will use a razor blade, knife, broken mirror or a piece of glass - what ever they can - and "cut" their skin allowing it to bleed openly for several minutes. **Burning** is the practice of placing cigarettes, hot metal, lighters, or lit matches to the skin and causing a burn. The practice of **wound interference** is done by creating a wound, whether it is a cut, burn, bruise, or bump, and preventing it from healing by tearing, picking or pushing on the wound. **Picking** is done when a self-mutilator literally "picks" at their skin until a wound is created and bleeds. Those that practice these self-abusive behaviors do so in an attempt to "release stress, pain, fear or anxiety." Generally practiced by teen girls - but affects at least 11 thousand boys a year as well - the teen may feel out of control regarding their life and practice these behaviors in an attempt to regain that control.

Some teens state that it "feels good to be in charge of your own pain when so many others try to do it for you." The teens that self-abuse are not the ones who get numerous tattoos or piercing; it is very difficult to identify a person who practices self-abusive behaviors out of a high school full of teens. These teens are generally good students, have normal or above normal appearances, are involved in school and after-school activities and have parents who are involved in the community. Most come from above average income levels and both parents may work outside the home. However, as they want to keep their secret, these teens will not usually participate in activities that require changing clothes at school - or will change in secret when no one is around - and may not have many close friends.

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Self-abusive teens tend to internalize any conflicts with friends, school or parents as they do not want to "cause trouble" for anyone. As a result, the fear, anxiety, anger, loneliness, sadness, isolation, frustration and emotional pain inside build to a point where the teen feels they will "explode." To prevent this explosion - and to deal with the emotions they are feeling - they cut, or burn, or pick in an attempt to "bleed them out." This to them is a release and a coping mechanism; it's how they deal with life and all it offers. Signs and symptoms of self-abusive or mutilating behavior includes the presence of fresh, healing and/or scars from old injuries, a knife, lighter or matches in purse or book bag with no logically explanation for it's being there, making excuses for injuries, wanting to do own laundry, locking self in bathroom for long periods of time with water running and the presence of a new injury upon leaving bathroom, blood or burn stains in the inside of clothing as well as becoming overly defensive when approached about the possibility of self-abusive behavior.

There is hope. Several organizations deal with self-abusive and mutilating behavior in an attempt to help those who harm themselves learns better coping mechanisms. Organizations such as "Don't Cut," "Self-Injury," and "Self Abuse Stops Now" have both websites and 800 numbers where teens can get information and help. Treatment for these types of behaviors may include individual and family therapy as well as medications to lessen the anxiety and depression the teen may be feeling.

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