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What is Self-Injury?

Many of the SCIP Teams have been asking for information on self-injury since they are seeing this behavior in their student population. This information will supplement the Monthly Handout done in January 2001. That handout is still available on the SCIP web site: www.lmef.org.

Self-injury is the act of attempting to alter a mood state by inflicting physical harm serious enough to cause tissue damage to one's body. The forms and severity of self-injury can vary and include: carving, scratching, branding, marking, burning/abrasions, biting, bruising, hitting, and picking and pulling skin and hair. It is **not** self-injury if the primary purpose is: sexual gratification, body decoration, spiritual enlightenment via ritual or fitting in or being cool.

Adolescents who have difficulty talking about their feelings may show their emotional tension, physical discomfort, pain and low self-esteem with self-injurious behaviors. Although they may feel like the "steam" in the "pressure cooker" has been released following the act of hurting themselves, teenagers may also feel hurt, anger, fear and hate. Most teens who self-injure go to great lengths to hide their wounds and scars. They may consider their self-harm to be a shameful secret and dread being discovered.

Self-injury makes some people feel better. It reduces physiological and psychological tension rapidly. If the person feels a strong uncomfortable emotion and doesn't know how to handle it, he or she knows that hurting him/herself will reduce the emotional discomfort quickly. Self-harm can be focusing, calming; it can give a person a feeling of control over their life and their body which they have experienced no other way.

Some people never get a chance to learn how to cope effectively. They learned at an early age that their feelings were bad and wrong and also that certain feelings weren't allowed. They may have been severely punished and they had no good role models for coping.

Scientists think that some people self-injure because of problems in the serotonin, which makes them tend to be more aggressive and impulsive than most people. Once their impulsive aggression is turned on the self, the person harming him/herself learns that self-injury reduces his/her level of distress and the cycle begins.

Self-injury is a maladaptive coping mechanism, a way to stay alive and not a failed suicide attempt. People who inflict physical harm on themselves are often doing it in an attempt to maintain psychological integrity---it's a way to keep from killing themselves. Some people who self-injure may later attempt suicide, but it is almost always using a method different from their preferred method of self-harm.

Parents must listen to their child and acknowledge their child's feelings. (Validate the feeling, not the behavior) Parents should also serve as role models in the way they deal with stressful situations and traumatic events, in how they respond to other people, by not allowing abuse or violence in the home, and by not engaging in acts of self-harm. Evaluation by a mental health professional may assist in identifying and treating the underlying causes of self-injury.

Many new therapeutic approaches have been and are being developed to help self-harmers learn new coping mechanisms and teach them how to start using those techniques instead of self-injury. Some drugs used to stabilize mood, ease depression and calm anxiety may also help reduce the urge to self-harm. For people who self-injure, many of who also have maladaptive social and coping skills, seeking professional care can be terrifying. People trying to help self-injurers should not try to take this coping mechanism away without helping them first come to terms with things that trigger incidents and learning new, healthier coping mechanisms with which to replace the old ones.

Resources: [The Scarred Soul; Understanding and Ending Self-Inflicted Violence](#) by Tracy Alderman; [Healing the Hurt Within: Understand and Relieve the Suffering Behind Self-Destructive Behaviour](#) by Jan Sutton; SIARI (Web site)

(Sources: www.healthyplace.com; www.focusas.com/SelfInjury.html.)

