Self-Injurious Behaviors

Self-Injury

Self-Injury is also termed self-mutilation, self-harm or self-abuse. The behavior is defined as the deliberate, repetitive, impulsive, non-lethal harming of oneself.

Self-injury includes:

- Cutting
- Scratching
- Picking scabs or interfering with wound healing
- Burning
- Punching self or objects
- Infecting oneself
- Inserting objects in body opening
- Bruising or breaking bones
- Some forms of hair pulling
- Other various forms of bodily harm

These behaviors, which pose serious risks, may be symptoms of a mental health problem that can be treated.

Warning Signs

Warning signs that someone is injuring himself or herself include:

- Unexplained frequent injury including cuts and burns
- Wearing long pants and sleeves in warm weather
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulty handling feelings
- Relationship problems
- Poor functioning at work, school or home

Incidence & Onset

- Experts estimate the incidence of habitual self-injurers is nearly 1% of the population with a higher proportion of females than males.
- The typical onset of self-harming acts is at puberty.
- The behaviors often last 5-10 years but can persist much longer without appropriate treatment.

Background of Self-Injurers

- Though not exclusively, the person seeking treatment is usually from a middle to upper class background, of average to high intelligence, and has low self-esteem.
- Nearly 50% report physical and/or sexual abuse during his or her childhood.
- Many report (as high as 90%), that they were discouraged from expressing emotions, particularly anger and sadness.

Behavior Patterns
Many who self-harm use multiple methods. Cutting arms or legs is the most common practice. Self-injurers may attempt to conceal the resultant scarring with clothing, and if discovered, often make excuses as to how an injury happened.

Reasons for Behaviors

- Self-injurers commonly report they feel:
  - Empty inside
  - Over or under stimulated
  - Unable to express their feelings
  - Lonely
  - Not understood by others
  - Fearful of intimate relationships and adult responsibilities

Self-injury is their way to cope with or relieve painful or hard-to-express feelings, and is generally not a suicide attempt. But relief is temporary, and a self-destructive cycle often develops without proper treatment.

Dangers

Self-injurers often become desperate about their lack of self-control and the addictive-like nature of their acts, which may lead them to true suicide attempts. The self-injury behaviors may also cause more harm than intended, which could result in medical complications or death. Eating disorders and alcohol or substance abuse intensify the threats to the individual’s overall health and quality of life.

Diagnoses

The diagnosis for someone who self-injures can only be determined by a licensed psychiatric professional. Self-harm behavior can be a symptom of several psychiatric illnesses: Personality Disorders (esp. Borderline Personality Disorder); Bipolar Disorder (Manic-Depression); Major Depression; Anxiety Disorders (esp. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder); as well as psychoses such as Schizophrenia.

Evaluation

If someone displays the signs and symptoms of self-injury, a mental health professional with self-injury expertise should be consulted. An evaluation or assessment is the first step, followed by a recommended course of treatment to prevent the self-destructive cycle from continuing.

Treatment

Self-injury treatment options include:

- Outpatient therapy, partial (6-12 hours a day)
- Inpatient hospitalization

When the behaviors interfere with daily living, such as employment and relationships, and are health or life threatening, a specialized self-injury hospital program with an experienced staff is recommended. The effective treatment of self-injury is most often: a combination of medication, cognitive/behavioral therapy, and interpersonal therapy, supplemented by other treatment services as needed. Medication is often useful in the management of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and the racing thoughts that may accompany self-injury.

Cognitive/behavioral therapy helps individuals understand and manage their destructive thoughts and behaviors. Contracts, journals, and behavior logs are useful tools for regaining self-control. Interpersonal therapy assists individuals in gaining insight and skills for the development and maintenance of relationships. Services for eating disorders, alcohol/substance abuse, trauma abuse, and family therapy should be readily available and integrated into treatment, depending on individual needs.
In addition to the above, successful courses of treatment are marked by:

- Patients who are actively involved in and committed to their treatment.
- Aftercare plans with support for the patient’s new self-management skills.
- Behaviors collaboration with referring and other involved professionals.

For More Information:

**Mental Health America of Illinois (MHA)**
("formerly the Mental Health Association in Illinois")
70 E. Lake St.
Suite 900
Chicago, IL 60601-5995
Phone: 312/368-9070
Fax: 312/368-0283
www.mhai.org

**Mental Health America (MHA)**
("formerly the National Mental Health Association")
2001 N. Beauregard Street, 12th Floor
Alexandria, VA 22311
Phone 703/684-7722
Fax 703/684-5968
www.mentalhealthamerica.net

**Mental Health Resource Center**
(800) 969-NMHA
TTY Line (800) 433-5959
http://www.nimh.nih.gov/

**S.A.F.E. Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends)**
7115 W. North Avenue
Suite 319
Oak Park, IL 60302
Information line: 800-DON'T CUT (800-366-8288)
www.selfinjury.com

**National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**
Public Information and Communications Branch
6001 Executive Boulevard, Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

Phone numbers:
(301) 443-4513 (local)
(866) 615-6464 (toll-free)
(301) 443-8431 (TTY)
(866) 415-8051 (TTY toll-free)

Fax number:
(301) 443-4279