

Students Who Self-Injure

Self-injury is an increasing issue among high school and college students – and one you may have heard more about in the news and popular media. The American Self-Harm Information

Clearinghouse (ASHIC) defines self-injury as “the deliberate, direct injury of one’s own body that causes tissue damage or leaves marks for more than a few minutes and that is done in order to deal with an overwhelming or distressing situation.”

Self-injury is also referred to as cutting, self-mutilation, self-abuse, self-destructive behavior and parasuicidal behavior. It’s an attempt to alter a mood state and to cope with overwhelming feelings. Essentially, intentionally injuring oneself is a form of self-medication. Many sufferers say it’s a way to “feel” something.

Yet, self-injury is *not* a suicide attempt. While the ASHIC reports that self-injurers are at a higher risk for committing suicide, if they intend to complete a suicide, they will often use a means different from their preferred method of self-injury.

Signs of Self-Injury

Some things to look for include ways that self-injurers wound themselves, such as:

- burning, biting or hair pulling

To Learn More

- SAFE Alternatives at www.selfinjury.com
- American Self Injury Information Clearinghouse at www.selfinjury.org
- Self Injury and Related Issues at www.siari.co.uk
- *Secret Scars: Uncovering and Understanding the Addiction of Self-Injury* by V.J. Tuner (2002)
- *Cutting: Overcoming and Understanding Self-Mutilation* by Steven Levenkron (1998)
- *A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain* by Marilee Strong (1999)

Why Do Student Self-Injure?

- they feel the need to punish or distract themselves from a perceived wrong
- they want to feel in control of who is hurting them
- they like the endorphin rush that self-injury can provide
- they want to make themselves feel alive again after feeling dead inside

*According to numerous studies, 35 to 80 percent of self-injurers also suffer from an eating disorder (A Bright Red Scream: Self-mutilation and the Language of Pain, 1998).

- cutting the skin with a sharp object, such as a knife, razor, glass or pins
- hitting their body with an object or their own fists
- hitting a heavy object, like a wall, often with their own head
- picking at scabs or skin until it bleeds
- inserting objects into body openings

Cutting, burning and head banging are the most common forms of self-injury. These behaviors can leave both physical and emotional scars. Self-injurers often tend to hide these scars and bruises under baggy or ill-timed (i.e. long sleeves on a hot day) clothing.

And self-injury can be addictive. Self-injurers may eventually develop a tolerance to pain, making it necessary to increase the severity of the injury in order to get the desired effect.

If you’re concerned that your student may be engaging in self-injurious behaviors, talk with a mental health professional in your community or on campus. Help is available to assist you in knowing what to say to your student and how to approach this problem.

From *Topics in Campus Threat Prevention: Eating Disorders, Body Image & Self-Injury* by Lisa Currie, PaperClip Communications (2004).