



Understanding Self-Harm

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Overview



- Understanding who is Self-Harming
- Understanding the Functions of Self-Harm
- Differentiating Self-Harm from Suicide
- Tools/Techniques for Intervening



Self-Harm: Definition



“Non-fatal, intentional self-injurious behavior resulting in actual tissue damage, illness or risk of death; or any ingestion of drugs or other substances not prescribed or in excess of prescription with clear intent to cause bodily harm or death.”

~Kreitman & Schreiber



Socio-cultural Influences



- School & work environments are fraught with stress
- Emphasis on competition which is conducive to isolation and distrust
- Marketing OTC and prescription medications to alter mood, etc
- Emphasis on physical appearance and impossible standards of beauty



Adolescent Peer Group Dimensions



- Teens experience powerful emotions but lack coping skills to manage those emotions
- Peer group cohesion is enhanced by behaviors that adults condemn or fear
- Desensitization because of peer group's endorsement of body piercing, tattoos



Internal Psychological Elements



- Self-injury works; it reduces tension and restores a sense of psychological equilibrium
- Self-injury has powerful communication aspects
- Self-injury provides a sense of control and empowerment




Vulnerabilities to Self-Harm



- Depression (emotional lability, irritability, loneliness, isolation, hopelessness) ***
- Anxiety (weak coping and/or social skills) ***
- Impulsivity
- Low self-esteem
- Perfectionism
- Confused sense of self (including sexual orientation)
- Internal locus of control (self-blaming) ***




Vulnerabilities, cont.

- Awareness of self-harm by peers/family (contagion) ***
 - Impaired family communication
 - Hypercritical parents ***
 - Violent/dysfunctional family
 - Use of cigarettes, alcohol, & drugs
 - Criminal history
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Characteristics of Self-Injurers

- Interpersonal Chaos
 - Labile Affect
 - Impulsiveness
 - Confusion about Self
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Emotion Vulnerability



- High sensitivity
- High reactivity
- Slow return to baseline



Invalidating Environment

- “Poorness of fit”
 - Child’s expression of private experiences are dismissed
 - Child learns to distrust internal cues
 - Child “ups the volume” to convince others that what they’re feeling is real
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Explanations for Self-Harm



- To stop bad feelings
- To feel something, even if pain/to relieve feeling numb or empty
- To punish self
- To feel relaxed
- To give self something to do when alone
- To get a reaction from someone, even if negative
- To get control of a situation
- To get attention/help
- To feel more a part of a group



Functions of Self-Harm

- Automatic-negative Reinforcement:
to stop bad feelings
 - Automatic-positive Reinforcement:
to feel something
 - Social-negative Reinforcement:
to avoid doing something unpleasant
 - Social-positive Reinforcement:
to get a reaction
- 




Guiding Principles



- Don't react with criticism or horror
- Remain non-judgmental
- Understand that behavior is a coping mechanism
- Emphasize hope
- Be fast & efficient in assessment to avoid reinforcing
- Reinforce skills not SI or self-harm



Guiding Principles, cont.

- Validate the emotion NOT the behavior
 - Contracts are not useful
 - Tell parent/guardian and REFER
 - There are effective treatments
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Assessment Questions



- What problem(s) were you trying to solve?
- What other ways have you thought about solving your problem?
- What was the event, feeling or thought that preceded the self-harm?



Suicide vs. Self-Harm




“a person who truly attempts suicide seeks to end all feelings whereas a person who self-mutilates seeks to feel better”

~ Favazza



Assessment Questions, cont.

- Did you intend to die? Were you clearly not wanting to die or did you feel ambivalent?
 - Do you feel helpless or hopeless all of the time or can you cheer yourself up?
 - What was extent of physical damage?
 - Who knows about the behavior?
 - How often are you hurting yourself?
 - Are you carrying the “tool” to hurt yourself?
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Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills



- Understanding factors that reduce effectiveness
- Saying “no” to unwanted requests & demands
- Getting wants & needs met
- Keeping relationships
- Keeping self-respect



Emotion Regulation Skills

- Identifying & describing emotions
 - Reducing vulnerability to negative emotions
 - Increasing positive emotions
 - Decreasing emotional suffering
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Distress Tolerance Skills



- Self-soothing
- Distracting, i.e. drawing, exercise
- Improving the moment
- Thinking of the pros & cons
- Accepting life as it is
- How not to make a bad situation worse
- Cultivating a willing response to situations



Friends & Helpers



- Reassure youth that adults can handle/help
- Advise youth not to tell everyone
- Advise youth not to ask “Are you okay?” or talk about behavior – instead spend time together
- Suggest that youth talk separately with counselor if worried



Parents



- Ask “What problem do you think your child is trying to solve?”
- Educate about the difference between suicide and self-harm
- Recognize heightened anxiety
- Get assessment but don’t assume that practitioners know how to treat behavior
- Inform therapist if already in care



Bibliography & Resources



- Don't Shoot the Dog Karen Pryor
- The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook Edmund Bourne
- Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder
Marsha Linehan
- Self-Mutilation: A Helping Book for Teens Who Hurt Themselves
Alicia Clarke
- Depressed and Anxious: The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Workbook
for Overcoming Depression & Anxiety Thomas Marra