

Self-Injury

There's no one single or simple cause that leads someone to self-injure. In general, self-injury is usually the result of an inability to cope in healthy ways with psychological pain.



Supporting Your Child

Definition

Self-injury, also called self-harm, is the act of deliberately harming your own body, such as cutting or burning yourself. It's typically not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, self-injury is an unhealthy way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger, and frustration.

Because self-injury is often done impulsively, it can be considered an impulse-control behavior problem.



Forms of Self-Injury

One of the most common forms of self-injury is cutting, which involves making cuts or severe scratches on different parts of the body with a sharp object. Other forms of self-harm include:

- Burning (with lit matches, cigarettes, or hot sharp objects like knives).
- Carving words or symbols on the skin.
- Breaking bones.
- Hitting or punching
- Piercing the skin with sharp objects.

- Head banging.
- Biting
- Pulling out hair.
- Persistently picking at or interfering with wound healing.

Most frequently, the arms, legs, and front of the torso are the targets of self-injury, because these areas can be easily reached and easily hidden under clothing. But any area of the body may be used for self-injury. People who self-injure may use more than one method to harm themselves.

Many people self-injure only a few times and then stop. However, for others, self-injury can become a long-term, repetitive behavior.

Although rare, some young people may self-injure in public or in groups to bond or to show others that they have experienced pain.

When a friend or loved one self-injures

If you have a friend or loved one who is self-injuring, you may be shocked and scared. Take all talk of self-injury seriously. Although you might feel that you'd be betraying a confidence, self-injury is too big a problem to ignore or to deal with alone. Here are some options for help.

Your child. You can start by consulting your pediatrician or family doctor who can provide an initial evaluation or a referral to a mental health specialist. Don't yell at your child or make threats or accusations, but do express concern.



Teenage friend. Suggest that your friend talk to parents, a teacher, a school counselor, or another trusted adult.

Adult. Gently encourage the person to seek medical and psychological treatment.

Risk Factors

Certain factors may increase the risk of self-injury, including:

Age. Most people who self-injure are teenagers and young adults, although those in other age groups also self-injure. Self-injury often starts in the early teen years, when emotions are more volatile and teens face increasing peer pressure, loneliness, and conflicts with parents or other authority figures.

Being female. Females are at greater risk of self-injuring than males are.

Having friends who self-injure. People who have friends who intentionally harm themselves are more likely to begin self-injuring.

Life issues. Some people who injure themselves were neglected, or sexually, physically, or emotionally abused, or experienced other traumatic events. They may have grown up and still remain in an unstable family environment, or they may be young people questioning their personal identity or sexuality.

Mental health issues. People who self-injure are more likely to be impulsive, explosive, and highly self-critical, and be poor problem-solvers. In addition, self-injury is commonly associated with certain mental disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.

Excessive alcohol or drug use. People who harm themselves often do so while under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs.

Causes

Through self-injury, the person may be trying to:

- Manage or reduce severe distress or anxiety and provide a sense of relief.
- Provide a distraction from painful emotions through physical pain.
- Feel a sense of control over his or her body, feelings, or life situations.
- Feel something, anything, even if it's physical pain, when feeling emotionally empty. Express internal feelings in an external way.
- Communicate depression or distressful feelings to the outside world.
- Be punished for perceived faults.
- Personal identity or sexuality.

Complications

Self-injury can cause a variety of complications, including:

1. Worsening feelings of shame, guilt, and low self-esteem
2. Infection, either from wounds or from sharing tools
3. Life-threatening problems, such as blood loss if major blood vessels or arteries are cut.
4. Permanent scars or disfigurement
5. Severe, possibly fatal injury, especially if harm is done while under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms may include:

Scars, such as from burns or cuts

Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, or other wounds

Broken bones

Keeping sharp objects on hand

Wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather.

Claiming to have frequent accidents or mishaps.

Spending a great deal of time alone.

Pervasive difficulties in interpersonal relationships

Persistent questions about personal identity, such as, "Who am I?" "What am I doing here?"

Behavioral and emotional instability, impulsivity, and unpredictability

Statements of helplessness, hopelessness, or worthlessness



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Adapted from material written by Mayo Clinic Staff. www.mayoclinic.com/health/selfinjury/DS00775