

Epidemic of pain: self-injury or "cutting" a growing threat to

Alison Palmer
Editor-in-Chief

High school can be tough. Pressure from friends, teachers and family can seem unbearable. Some teenagers just shrug it off, while some turn to drugs or alcohol to cope with their problems. An ever-increasing number of teenagers, however, are now turning to a more accessible way to cope, self-injury.

People self-injure to release the emotions that they feel that they cannot otherwise express. "There's a pain inside, and the injury is there to match that pain," says Nancy Fallows, a counselor for Putnam County Human Services. "When they're hurting inside, the pain gives them relief."

Jan Sutton, counselor and author of SIARI: Self-Injury and Re-

lated Issues, defines self-injury as a "compulsion or impulse to inflict physical wounds on one's own body, motivated by a need to cope with unbearable psychological distress or regain a sense of emotional balance."

In an article by Patrick Welsh in USA Today, Psychiatrist Joshua Weiner says self-injury is "the anorexia and bulimia of the new millennium." Welsh, an English teacher at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, VA says, "Parents and educators can't afford to let self-injury creep into the American lexicon. 'If we don't act aggressively to understand and treat these kids, the suffering will continue, with incalculable costs to these adolescents and our society.'"

Not every person self-injures for the same reasons. Some harm

themselves for relief from intense emotions, particularly anger and sadness. "[When people self-injure] they feel all the pain leave their body," says Dr. Christopher Edwards, a local psychologist. Often these emotions stem from former physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Others have distressful emotional problems as a result from a home or environment where expressing emotions is discouraged and sometimes punished which causes feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Some self-injure to cope with their problems. When a situation seems too overwhelming or unbearable, self-injury eases their tensions and makes their problems feel more manageable. "[Self-injury] is a terrible coping mechanism, but it's the only one they know," says Dr. Edwards. By self-injuring,

a person turns their emotional pain into physical pain which the person feels he can control, unlike circumstances in their life that is out of their control.

Kaye Randall, a social worker in Greensboro, SC says that, "It's as if they have a volcano inside, and that has to erupt. Cutting makes them feel calmer."

Barry Walsh said, "Quite amazingly, self-injury is now commonplace in middle and high schools and college settings. The behavior is common among high achieving teens and young adults. Why is self-injury moving into populations where it was all but unknown before? The best answer is that the level of stress in middle, high school and colleges is high among students and their coping skills are not up to managing it."

Some teenagers purposefully injure themselves as a form of punishment. For example, teenagers may cut themselves because they did badly on a test or if they feel guilty for something. Boys who worry that they are homosexual and feel guilty about it may injure themselves.

To communicate to others their pain and emotions that they cannot articulate is another reason why people self-injure. Although most self-injurers wear clothes and makeup that hide their self-inflicted scars and wounds, Fallows says that, "at some level I think they want someone to know. No one can see the pain on the inside... [self-injury] is an outward expression of the pain they're feeling inside."

Some teenagers self-injure for recognition. "It's a guarantee way to get attention," says Dr. Edwards. If they receive the desired attention and see that by harming themselves they can get what they want, they may be likely to do it again.

Emotions associated with self-injury are feelings of being upset, stressed, frightened, angry, abandoned, misunderstood, lonely,

unworthy, depressed, panicky, out of control or a failure. People who self-injure often have a very poor sense of self-worth and a strong sense of self-hatred.

Although these are the typical emotions experienced by someone before he self-injures, many people cannot describe the feelings they have before they self-injure. This feeling is called alexithymia. According to Dr. Edwards, people in this state often have emotional pain that is so intense, the body "kind of shuts down inside," yet the distress is still present, and they release it through self-injury.

Self-injury is also used to relieve dissociation. Dissociation is a more intense version of "zoning-out." It is an intense feeling of unreality and separation from one's body. Self-injury helps bring a person back to consciousness and reality.

Self-injury is becoming more prevalent among teenagers throughout the world. According to Dr. Edwards, teenagers often harm themselves simply because they see their friends do it to cope with their problems. As odd as it may sound, some do it to "fit-in" or because they think it's cool, but it's not. These "superficial injurers" want to have problems to be like their peers. True self-injury, however, usually is due to a former traumatic experience, abuse, neglect or a dysfunctional home-life.

Once people start self-injuring it can be difficult to stop. Since it is only temporary relief, some teenagers make self-injury a habit, and, unfortunately, this habit can last up to ten years or longer without treatment.

It is a common misconception that self-injury is done with suicidal intentions. If a person cuts himself to cause death, it is attempted suicide, not self-injury. On the contrary, many self-injure to escape their emotional agony and to prevent suicide. They want to feel pain to

know that they are still alive. "The pain is so intense that they want to harm themselves... Rather than kill themselves, they cut themselves, and they don't feel the need to hurt themselves after that," explains Dr. Edwards.

Most self-inflicted wounds are not fatal, although if taken too far, it can have harmful effects. The loss of too much blood can cause medical problems such as anemia and is even more harmful to those who also have an eating disorder. After self-injury, however, a person may feel guilty for what he did and in cases of extreme guilt can lead to more self-loathing and maybe even suicide.

One effect, that practically every self-injurer experiences, is the appearance of permanent scars. Most teenagers who have scars from self-injury will try to hide them. They usually will wear long sleeves to hide the marks, and if the scars are seen and questioned about, they usually will lie with explanations like, "The cat scratched me."

Of the world population, one percent self-injures. Approximately one to two thirds of self-injurers also has an eating disorder, such as anorexia or bulimia. Statistically, more girls than boys self-injure. "Men tend to project their anger outward with violence, hurting others. Women tend to direct it inward and hurt themselves," says Fallows.

As people begin to realize that self-injury is a real and serious problem growing among teenagers, many are beginning to take action to understand this issue. Harvard University is currently conducting a study on self-injurers between the ages of twelve and eighteen to learn more about the problem and try to discover ways to improve treatment.

Warning signs that someone is participating in self-injury are unexplained frequent cuts and burns, wearing long sleeves in warm weather, avoiding swimming pools or beaches, low self-esteem, and difficulty handling feelings.

If parents discover that their child is self-injuring, there are several things they can do. First of all, parents need to listen to their child and try to understand the reasons for their harmful behavior. A medical health care professional or a psychologist should be consulted if the child continues harming themselves. Numerous types of therapy exist for self-injurers.

One way parents can prevent a child from self-injuring is to be a role model by coping with pressure and stressful events in a healthy manner and not by becoming angry or violent.

Self-injuring is a serious and dangerous act characteristic of people with a severe emotional problem. It can lead to other destructive habits such as drinking and substance abuse. One should notify a trusted adult or authority if he knows someone is participating in self-injury. The national hotline for help with self-injury is 1-800-DONTCUT.

Alice Paul: influential suffrage leader

Anna Eisen
Charger Staff

Born into a Quaker family on January 11, 1885, Alice Paul was an inspiring leader who was influential in the fight for women's right to vote. She used her religious convictions to bring about great social changes for women and men in the United States.

She attended Swarthmore College and majored in biology. She went on to attend the New York School of Social Work, during which time she worked at the New York College Settlement House. After her experience in New York, she went to England to participate in the settlement house movement and study. She joined the English suffrage effort, and many of her experiences there inspired her later political work in the United States.

Following her return to the U.S., she earned her Master's and Doctor-

al degrees at the University of Pennsylvania in 1912. She became active in the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) that same year. The group's leader, Carrie Chapman Catt, emphasized working for women's votes on the state level. However, Alice Paul wanted to approach the issue on a federal level by working for a constitutional amendment. She and the women who shared her views separated from NAWSA to form the Congressional Committee for Woman Suffrage, which, in 1917, became the National Woman's Party (NWP).

NWP worked diligently to educate the public and held numerous rallies. In March 1917, their picketing at the White House coincided with President Woodrow Wilson's second inauguration. No members were initially arrested, but by June several were sentenced to a workhouse in Occoquan, Virginia, after

being charged with obstructing traffic. The women were treated poorly, which led them to hold hunger strikes. Smuggled letters from imprisoned suffragette Lucy Burns revealed detailed descriptions of force-feeding following the hunger strike.

After the women's release about six months later, they continued their work, and in 1920 the amendment was finally ratified and passed. Alice Paul shifted her focus to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which did not pass Congress until 1970, but was never ratified.

She also promoted rights for women to be part of the United Nations charter and in the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Paul died in 1977, and she is still recognized for the ways in which she impacted the struggle for women's rights through her beliefs in gender equality and nonviolent political action.

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