

Pacific Beach Middle School
Counseling Center

Teens and Self-Injury

What is it?

Self-injury can be defined as the deliberate harming or alteration of one's body tissue *without* the conscious intent to commit suicide. Self-injury is often used to alter a mood state by inflicting bodily harm.

- Approximately 1 out of 4 of the population uses self-injury as a way of dealing with overwhelming feelings or situations.
- In the U.S., it's estimated that one in every 200 girls between 13 and 19 years old, or one-half of one percent, cut themselves regularly. Those who cut comprise about 70 percent of teen girls who self injure.
- Self-injury is only a problem if it is interfering with their life.

Examples of self-injury: cutting (the most common type of self-injury), scratching, marking, burning, biting, bruising, hitting, and picking/pulling skin and hair.

When is it not self-injury?

Sexual gratification, body decoration (piercing, tattoos), spiritual (ritual), fitting in or being cool.

Why do teens self-injure?

- This is rarely an attempt at suicide. Self-injury is used as a coping mechanism. When feelings are too overwhelming (usually anger and anxiety) self-injury will be used to as a way to bring their emotional and physical state back to a level that is bearable-this happens almost immediately after the self-injury occurs.
- Some teens self-injure as a way to feel alive and/or regain control.
- Some teens may have never learned proper coping strategies, so in turn they found self-injury to work for them in order to handle emotions and situations. Self-injury can be self-nurturing or self-punishment.
- Even though most teens that self-injure usually go to extreme lengths to hide their actions (it is viewed as a shameful act), it can be used as form of communication.

What if my child is self-injuring?

- Do make sure that your teen is not considering suicide: Ask
- Remember: self-injury is used as a coping mechanism not as a suicide attempt.
- Listen* to your child and acknowledge their feelings. Validate your child's feelings and not necessarily the self-injury.
- Serve as role models* on how to effectively cope with stressful situations
- Do not* expect your child to just stop-this is their way of coping, but do continue to talk with your child about their feelings, various ways to deal with stress and continue to offer help.
- Therapy should be strongly considered* as an option- the family may want to go together to address the underlying feelings that may be leading up to the act of self-injury and so the self-injurer does not feel alone.

Resources and Websites:

Focus Adolescent Services

<http://www.focusas.com/SelfInjury.html>

Center for Young Women's Health

<http://www.youngwomenshealth.org/si.html>

Teen's Health

http://www.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/cutting.html

TeenHelp.com

<http://www.teenhelp.com/teen-health/cutting-stats-treatment.html>

Books:

The Scarred Soul: Understanding and Ending Self-inflicted Violence. by Tracy Alderman, Ph. D.

Secret Scars: Uncovering and Understanding the Addiction of Self-Injury. by VJ Turner