

# St. Mary's Institute for Mental Health

*An affiliate of:*



**INTRACOASTAL**  
HEALTH SYSTEMS, INC.

## **Information for Self-Injurers**

## **What is self-injury?**

For the purpose of this discussion, we'll define self-injury as moderate to superficial self-harm, which is direct, repetitive and of low lethality. It is self harm without the motivation to commit suicide. It is impulsive, and self-injurers tend to ruminate on self-injury even when they are not actually doing it. The self-injurer may feel a rapid release of tension and anxiety. Afterward, the self-injurer may feel guilty or angry, but it isn't the oppressive, pushing, demanding tension-filled feeling it was before.

Mosby's *Medical, Nursing and Allied Health Dictionary* (1994) contains the following definition:

...a state in which an individual is at high risk to injure but not kill himself or herself, and that produces tissue damage and tension relief. Risk factors include being a member of an at-risk group, inability to cope with increased psychological/physiological tension in a healthy manner, feelings of depression, rejection, self-hatred, separation anxiety, guilt, depersonalization, command hallucinations, need for sensory stimuli, parental emotional deprivation, and a dysfunctional family.

## **Why do people self-injure?**

Researchers have identified several possible motivations from talking to self-injurers:

- escape from emptiness, depression, and feelings of unreality
- to ease tension
- relief of intense feelings they can't cope with
- expression of emotional pain
- to escape numbness, to feel something, to know they're still alive
- obtain a feeling of euphoria
- continuing abusive patterns: self injurers tend to have been abused or discounted as children. Sometimes it's self-punishment for being "bad"
- relief of anger: many self-injurers have enormous rage within
- maintaining or obtaining influence over the behavior of others
- exerting a sense of control over others
- grounding in reality, to combat "unreal" feelings
- maintaining a sense of security or feelings of uniqueness
- expressing or repressing sexuality

Researchers have found that people who self-injure were likely to have been physically or sexually abused in childhood, or consistently *invalidated* as children.

Self-injury is a form of coping, but it's a morbid one that doesn't work well. The

information in this packet is to help you and your treatment team work on more healthy ways to handle difficult feelings and situations.

## Stopping

Deciding to stop self-injury is a very important and personal decision. It can take a long time to realize that you deserve and can have a life without scars and bruises. Stopping this behavior involves learning new ways to cope, setting limits for your self-harm and taking responsibility for it. It also involves feeling some difficult feelings, feelings that self-injury has diverted you from.

Before you stop, make sure that most of the following statements is true for you: While in the hospital, work on a list of the answers to these questions.

- I have a support system of treatment professionals, friends and family that I can use if I feel like hurting myself.
- There are at least two people in my life that I can call if I want to hurt myself.
- I feel comfortable talking about self-injury with at least three people.
- I have a list of ten things I can do instead of hurting myself.
- I have a safe place to go if I need to leave my home so as not to hurt myself.
- I feel confident that I could get rid of all the things that I might be likely to use to hurt myself.
- I am willing to feel uncomfortable, scared and frustrated.
- I have told at least two people that I am going to stop hurting myself.
- I feel confident that I can endure thinking about hurting myself without actually doing so.
- I want to stop hurting myself.

## How do I stop?

At first, strategies that create a strong physical sensation but **do not** produce lasting results can be employed. This is a temporary bridge that can be used until you develop new coping strategies. The groups here at IMH will help teach you those coping skills, and get at the feelings you need to feel. Using new coping strategies isn't easy, it doesn't just come- you have to **force** yourself to try them. It will be a struggle to try different things. Each time you choose to do so, it becomes easier the next time. You have choices.

## What do I do instead?

Self-injury is a detour away from uncomfortable feelings. One way to calm the

urge to self-injure is to match what you are feeling at the moment with certain activities.

First, take a few moments and look behind the urge. What are you feeling? Angry? Frustrated? Restless? Sad? Craving the feeling of self-harm? Unreal? Unfocused?

Next, match the activity to the feeling. A few examples:

(Discuss with your doctor and treatment team which you can do while in the hospital)

### ***Angry, frustrated, restless***

Try something physical and violent, not directed at a living thing:

Make a soft cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself

Hit a punching bag.

Use a pillow to hit a wall.

Rip up an old newspaper or phone book.

On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do.

Cut and tear the picture.

Make clay models and smash them.

Throw ice into the bathtub or against a concrete surface hard enough to break it.

Break sticks.

Rant at the thing you are cutting/tearing/hitting, starting slowly at first.

Crank up the music and dance.

Clean.

Go for a walk or a run.

Stomp around in heavy shoes.

Play handball or tennis.

### ***Sad, soft, melancholy, depressed, unhappy***

Do something slow and soothing, like taking a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles, curling up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book, babying yourself somehow. Do whatever makes you feel taken care of and comforted. Light sweet smelling incense. Listen to soothing music. Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt. Call a friend and just talk about things. Make a tray of special treats, and watch TV or read. Visit a friend.

### ***Craving sensation, feeling depersonalized, dissociating, feeling unreal***

Do something that creates a sharp physical sensation:

Squeeze ice hard, or hold ice on the part of you you want to hurt.

Put a finger into frozen food (like ice cream) for a minute.

Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of gingerroot.

Slap a tabletop hard.

Snap your wrist with a rubberband.

Take a cold shower.

Stomp your feet on the ground.

Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

### ***Wanting focus***

Do a task that is exacting and requires focus and concentration (like needlework or playing a computer game, doing a craft).

Eat a raisin or something else mindfully. Pick it up, noticing how it feels in your hand. Look at it carefully: see the asymmetries and think about what it went through to end up in your hand. Notice its texture, its smell. Taste it, and notice the texture and how it feels on your tongue. Is the inside different from the outside? Finally, swallow.

Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as possible. Include everything: size, weight, texture, shape, color, possible uses, etc.

Pick a subject and research it on the web.

Do word puzzles.

Color.

### ***Wanting to see blood***

Draw on yourself with a red felt tip pen.

Take a small bottle of liquid red food coloring. Press it against the place you want to cut, letting the food coloring trickle out.

Draw on the areas you want to cut with ice made with red food coloring in it.

Paint on yourself with red tempura paint.

### ***Wanting to see scars or pick scabs***

Get a henna tattoo kit. You put the henna on as a paste and leave it overnight: the next day you can pick it off as you would a scab and it leaves an orange-red mark behind.

Another thing that sometimes helps is to tell yourself that if you still want to harm yourself in 15 minutes, you can. When the time is up, see if you can go another

15 minutes.

### **Journaling Exercise**

Answer the following questions as honestly and in as much detail as you can.

1. Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has brought me to this point?
2. Have I been here before? What did I do to deal with it? How did I feel then?
3. What have I done to ease this discomfort so far? What else can I do that won't hurt me?
4. How do I feel right now?
5. How will I feel when I'm hurting myself?
6. How will I feel after hurting myself? How will I feel tomorrow morning?
7. How can I avoid this stressor, or deal better with it in the future?
8. Do I need to hurt myself?

### **Things to work on in Group and in therapy**

1. **Accepting Reality:** this concept focuses on learning to accept reality as it is. Accepting it doesn't mean you'll like it or are willing to allow it to continue unchanged; it means realizing that the basic facts of the situation are even if they aren't as you would like them to be. Without this kind of radical acceptance, change isn't possible.
2. **Letting Go of Emotional Suffering:** learning ways to observe and describe your emotion, separate yourself from it, and let go of it.
3. **Distraction:** simply doing other things to keep yourself from self-harming. Some of these we've discussed already. Other ideas include counting all the colors you can see around you at this moment, or getting involved in volunteer work.
4. **Self-Soothing:** using things that are pleasing to your senses to soothe yourself.
5. **Interpersonal Effectiveness:** being clear about what you want and about your priorities. Learning good communication.
6. **Relaxation Skills:** breath counting, positive imagery, self-hypnosis or hypnosis with a therapist.

## Self-Injury:

### A Guide for Teens

Your teen years can be the most complicated phase of your life. Some of your challenges include: harder school work, changes in relationships, and changes in your body. Sometimes it can be hard to handle the feelings that come with these changes, while you're also trying to manage the day-to-day of teen life. Some teens have a harder time balancing out their feelings and may turn to harmful activities like drinking, using drugs, or self-injury. This guide was created to help you understand self-injury, and how you can get help for yourself or a friend.

#### What is self-injury?

When you hurt your body on purpose it is called "self-injury." Other names for self-injury are "cutting", "self-harm", or "self-mutilation." Some ways that people hurt themselves are by cutting, scratching, picking, or burning their body.

People who self-injure sometimes hurt themselves repeatedly, and often have scars. While you are self-injuring you might not feel pain, and might do more damage than you mean to.

#### Why do people self-injure?

People who injure themselves are experiencing overwhelming feelings, like extreme anxiety or tension, and in the moment self-injury may seem to provide a feeling of escape or relief. Some people also experience "depersonalization," which is when a person doesn't feel real, or feels she is outside of her body watching herself. People who feel this way might cut or harm themselves to help themselves feel "real" again. Others cut or injure themselves as a way of punishing themselves. Many people who self-injure have a history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and have a sense of shame about themselves.

Most people who self-injure haven't yet learned healthier ways to cope with negative feelings. Although you might feel stuck in a pattern of injuring yourself, there is definitely a way out.

#### Is self-injury the same as being suicidal?

No, but sometimes injuries *can* be severe enough to cause death, and sometimes people who self-injure may *become* suicidal.

If you, or someone you know is feeling suicidal you should get professional help **immediately**. Tell a parent, an adult you trust, or someone who can help right away. If you can't get someone to help you or do not know what to do, call 911 or go to the closest hospital emergency room.

### What should I do if I self-injure?

It is very important to ask for help if you or someone you know self-injures. Talk to an adult you trust, such as a parent, relative, guidance counselor or your health care provider. Friends can be very supportive, but it is important that you tell an adult too.

When you talk to a trusted adult, tell them you have been self-injuring, and that you want to stop. Ask them for support, and ask them to help you find resources and make a plan for stopping.

Special note: if you have a cut that is infected, or that won't stop bleeding, you will need to get first aid **right away**.

### Can I stop hurting myself?

Yes, you can stop. Stopping self-injury is like quitting abusing drugs or alcohol. It's a challenge, but with support and a good plan, you can do it! You can find healthier ways to handle your intense feelings, and you can learn to take good care of yourself.

Deciding to stop self-injuring is a decision that **you** will have to make for yourself—but it is a lot easier with the support of family, friends, and a health care provider.

The first thing you should know is that you are a good person, and that your body and mind deserve good care. You may not have heard that very often in your life, but it is important to know this basic truth about yourself! Knowing this can inspire you to learn healthier ways of coping with stress.

### How do I stop hurting myself in the moment?

It's important to find ways to soothe or focus yourself when you feel like self-injuring. Make a list of non-harmful things that help you feel relaxed and real, like

playing a sport, meditating, drawing, or playing an instrument. Keep this list where you can see it so when you feel like hurting yourself you will have other options and you can choose to do something else.

*Here are some ways to use up nervous energy:*

- go for a long walk
- dance to loud music
- shoot hoops or kick soccer goals
- go jogging
- clean your room

*Here are some ways to relax and de-stress:*

- take a bath or a hot shower
- listen to music
- write in a journal
- talk to a friend
- read a good book

Many teens find that keeping busy and spending time with good friends and family helps the most.

**How can I recover from self-injury?**

Self-injury is a symptom of deeper emotional pain. Getting counseling or psychotherapy can help you better understand your feelings and your life situation. A counselor or therapist can help you figure out why you hurt yourself, what situations put you at risk, and what steps you can take to learn healthier ways to deal with intense emotions. If you are also dealing with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues, a therapist can address those too. Sometimes a healthcare provider may recommend medication as part of your overall plan for recovering from self-injury.

Making the decision to stop self-injuring is a big first step. Remember that learning healthier ways to handle intense feelings will take time. The key to recovering is to get support from people who care about you, and treatment from a therapist or counselor. You deserve this change, so keep working on it, and remember, you are not alone in your recovery!

## How can I help a friend who self-injures?

If you have a friend who self-injures there are steps you can take to help them stop, and help them recover.

First, suggest to your friend that they talk to an adult they trust, like a parent, school counselor, or their health care provider. Second, support your friend by listening to them, and letting them know you care about them. Lastly, print out this guide, or some other information on self-injury, and give it to them. They can read it when they feel ready.

If your friend won't talk to an adult, and refuses help, you should find a trusted adult who knows your friend, and talk to that person. Tell an adult even if your friend asked you to keep their self-injury a secret! Your friend might get angry at you, but in this situation, it's more important to get help. Self-injury is very serious and can be deadly, and your friend's safety is more important than privacy right now. Your friend might be mad at you for a while, but you can apologize and talk about it later, after you know they're safe.

## Self-mutilation

Self-mutilation, or self-injury as many others and I prefer to call it, is the deliberate damaging of body tissue **without conscious intent to commit suicide**. Just like with eating disorders, self-injury is used as a coping mechanism in life. Whatever pain is inside of the person, whether it be from family problems, sexual or physical abuse, or emotional neglect, the feelings are unbearable and can only be released or "forgotten about" through the pain that comes from injuring one's self. The prevalence of self-injury is unknown because many cases go unseen and untreated, but it has been estimated that about 750 per 100,000 persons per year have problems with self-injury. (Rates of 34% and 40.5% have been reported for people diagnosed as having multiple personality disorder and bulimia.) Self-injury usually begins in late childhood and early adolescence, and although for some it becomes a chronic problem, most self-mutilators do not continue the behavior after 10-15 years. However, self-injury can be a chronic problem if the situation that triggers the victim to cut or hurt themselves continues to stay in their lives.

### who.suffers.from.this

Common sufferers of self-injury are abuse survivors, eating disorder sufferers, and a smaller group suffers from substance abuse and kleptomania. In the home of someone who hurts themselves often there is violence with an inhibition of verbal expression of anger, and/or a stormy parental relationship along with neglect or a lack of emotional warmth expressed by the parents. Sometimes there is the loss of a parent through death or divorce, or parental depression or alcoholism. Often the people who hurts themselves has rapid mood swings and suffers from some sort of depression, possibly even Bipolar Disorder. Perfectionist tendencies and a dislike of the body/body shape are both characteristic of someone who is prone to self-injuring. When it appears that the family is in good shape but yet a child still self-injures, perfectionism and the feelings of low or non-existent self-worth are the next possible explanations as to what triggers it.

### why.does.someone.do.this

It has been proposed that children who don't receive adequate protection and are abused, violated, or neglected, fail to learn how to protect themselves. They then re-enact their abuse and lack of protection through a variety of self-harming behaviors and this is how self-mutilation can begin. The person who self-injures experiences an inability to tolerate intense feelings and often has trouble expressing emotional needs or experiences, which is where the injury comes in to help "end" or lessen the stress. Injuring one's self can be looked at as a means of communicating anger and distress to other people when there are no other ways.

### **control.and.strength**

For some, seeing the blood from cuts gives them an odd sense of well-being and strength - the same feelings that were stripped away from them at some point in their life. A self-injurer may injure themselves as a way of empowering themselves, as well. The person feels strong and in control by enduring the pain that they inflict on themselves.

### **punishment.and.protection**

On the flip side, a self-injurer may feel very unworthy and meek, and self-injury can be used as a means of punishment. This frequently is the motive with victims of eating disorders, as in both cases the feelings of unworthiness are there. Another theory is that the victim is constantly told that they are beautiful and that they will attract a lot of boys (girls if it is a male) and the person becomes afraid of being raped (possibly again) or victimized, so they create scars to hopefully scare away anyone who tries to come in contact with them.

Answer these as honestly and in as much detail as you are able to right now. No one is going to see the answers except you, and lying to yourself is pretty pointless.

1. Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has brought me to this point?
2. Have I been here before? What did I do to deal with it?  
How did I feel then?
3. What I have done to ease this discomfort so far? What else can I do that won't hurt me?
4. How do I feel right now?
5. How will I feel when I am hurting myself?
6. How will I feel after hurting myself? How will I feel tomorrow morning?
7. Can I avoid this stressor, or deal with it better in the future?
8. Do I need to hurt myself?

## What to Do Instead of Injuring

- Get out of the house and stay in a public place.
- Be with safe and supportive people.
- Call a friend.
- Write in a journal, paint, write poetry, take pictures, make a collage.
- Watch a funny movie.
- Make a no-harm contract with your therapist.
- Go for a drive.
- Do relaxation exercises.
- Do deep breathing.
- Listen to music. Make mood tapes.
- Read a good book or magazine.
- Go for a walk.
- Clean a closet, a dresser, the kitchen.
- Take a bubble bath.
- Go shopping
- Wear a rubber band around one wrist and when the urge to harm is strong, snap it lightly.
- Hold ice in your hand (sounds strange, but it works).
- With a washable red marker, make marks where you want to hurt yourself. This sometimes helps, especially if you like to see the blood.
- Most importantly, get rid of anything you could hurt yourself with.

## Reading List

### **Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation by Steven Levenkron**

*Cutting* takes the reader through the psychological experience of the person seeking relief from mental pain and anguish in self-inflicted physical pain. Steven Levenkron traces the components that predispose a personality to becoming a self-mutilator: genetics, family experience, childhood trauma, and parental behavior. Written for the self-mutilator, parents, friends, and therapists, Levenkron explains why the disorder manifests in self-harming behaviors and, most of all, describes how the self-mutilator can be helped.

### **The Scarred Soul: Understanding & Ending Self-Inflicted Violence by Tracy Alderman**

The *Scarred Soul* explores the reasons behind this behavior and shows how to overcome the psychological traps that lead to self-destructive acts. There are numerous activities designed to help you better understand and cope with this difficult issue. Therapists, friends, and family members of people who engage in self-inflicted violence can also benefit from reading this book.

### **\*A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain by Marilee Strong**

It is a compulsion that, while shocking and bewildering to most people, affects 2 million or more Americans and countless others around the globe. Rejecting the classic psychiatric wisdom that views self-mutilation as a species of suicidal behavior, Strong links the phenomenon instead to the will to live—often in the face of such overwhelming childhood abuse that the resulting dissociative behaviors are something akin to posttraumatic stress disorder.

Through interviews with dozens of psychiatrists, doctors, researchers, clinicians, and cutters around the country, Marilee Strong discovers what factors most often lead to cutting, how feelings of rage and self-punishment are played out, and how cutters use the physical pain of cutting to blot out emotional pain locked inside. Strong reveals what people with the affliction and those close to them can do to start a process of healing.

### **When the Body Is the Target: Self-Harm, Pain, and Traumatic Attachments by Sharon K. Farber, PhD**

Farber, a clinical social worker, offers insights for the mental health professional struggling to understand self-harm and its origins. Using attachment theory to explain how addictive connections to pain and suffering develop, she discusses many kinds of behavior and explores the language of self-harm and the translation of that language and its psychic functions in the therapeutic setting. She includes rich clinical material in providing a practical approach to the diagnosis, assessment, and treatment of such patients, and shows how the attachment relationship formed in treatment can serve as the cornerstone of therapeutic change.

### **The Disease to Please: Curing the People Pleasing Syndrome by Harriet B. Braiker, PhD**

Who are people pleasers? They are the people who say yes when they want to say no, or the perennial nice person whose resentment is concealed behind their public happy face. Now best-selling author and frequent Oprah guest Dr. Harriet Braiker offers help for anyone who has ever felt the resentment of giving 100% of themselves to others and getting nothing in return. *The Disease to Please* explodes the dangerous myth that people pleasing is a benign problem. It is the first book to treat people pleasing as a serious psychological syndrome, and it breaks new ground in its approach to offer a cure. Dr. Braiker offers a 21-Day Action Plan for curing the Disease to Please. A daily psychological workout and skills-training program, it will help readers replace the compulsion to comply with a more conscious and reasoned choice to care. *The Disease to Please* includes extensive case studies, and diary and journal formats to help recovery, an effective three-stage short-term therapy approach.

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