



Women and self-injury

What is self-injury?

'Self-injury' is any sort of self-harm which involves causing injuries or pain to your own body. It can take many forms.

The most common form of self-injury is probably cutting. Usually these cuts are not deep, but sometimes they are. Women may also burn themselves, punch themselves or hit their bodies against something. Some people pick their skin, or pull out hair.

How common is self-injury?

Self-injury is far more common than most people think. All sorts of people self-injure. Often they carry on successful careers or look after families, and there is little outward sign that there is anything wrong. Self-injury seems to be more common among women. This is partly because men are more likely to express strong feelings - such as anger - outwardly.

Many women who self-injure believe they are the only person who does this. Fear and shame may force women to keep self-injury secret for many years. This means that no-one knows how big the problem really is. Our experience shows that where it is acceptable to talk about it, many women will say that they have self-injured at some time.

Why do women self-injure?

There are always powerful reasons why a woman hurts herself. For most women it is a way of getting through great emotional pain.

Many people cope with their problems in ways that are risky and harmful to themselves. Some drink or eat too much, smoke, drive too fast, gamble, or make themselves ill through overwork or worry. They might do this to numb or distract themselves from problems or feelings they cannot bear to face (like 'drowning your sorrows').

Self-injury, although it is more shocking, is very like these 'ordinary' forms of self-harm. Like drink or drugs, hurting herself may help a woman block out painful feelings. Like taking risks or gambling, it may provide danger and distraction.

Often women say that self-injury helps them to release unbearable tension, which may be caused by anxiety, grief or anger. It puts their pain 'outside', where it feels easier to cope with. For others it relieves feelings of guilt or shame. Sometimes a woman's self-injury is a 'cry for help'; a way of showing (even to herself) that she has suffered and is in pain. Perhaps hurting herself is a way of feeling 'real' and alive, or having control over something in her life.

What lies behind women's distress may be painful experiences in childhood or adulthood. A woman may have suffered neglect or abuse, may have always been criticised and silenced, rather than supported and allowed to express her needs and feelings. Some women who self-injure come from chaotic or violent families. For others, adult experiences of emotional or physical cruelty have led to their desperation.

Myths about self-injury

Self-injury is a failed suicide attempt

Self-injury is a way of carrying on with life, not of dying. Injuries are seldom life-threatening. It is important to know the difference between self-injury and a suicide attempt, so that the true meanings of self-injury can be understood.

Self-injury is 'just attention seeking'

Self-injury is mainly about trying to cope with great pain. For some it is a desperate attempt to show that something is really wrong, and that someone should take notice of their distress.

Self-injury is a sign of madness

Self-injury is a sign of distress, not madness; a sign of someone trying to cope with her life as best she can.

A person who self-injures is a danger to others

Someone who self-injures is directing her hurt and anger at herself, not at others. Most would be appalled at the idea of hurting anyone else.

What can help?

Self-injury causes great distress, and can seem a difficult problem to overcome. But it is possible for a woman to stop hurting herself, if she can understand and sort out the problems behind what she does.

If you are someone who self-injures

Think about what your self-injury is 'saying' about your feelings and your life. This will give you clues about problems you need to work on. You might find it helpful to talk about your self-injury and what lies behind it with friends or a counsellor. To find out about counselling you could ask your GP, Women's Centre, rape or sexual abuse support service, MIND group, library, Wellwoman clinic or Citizens Advice Bureau.

Helping someone who self-injures

You may feel upset, shocked or angry when someone you care about hurts herself. Try to look behind the injuries and see the person in pain. The most precious things you can offer are acceptance and support. Let your friend know you understand that self-injury is helping her to cope at the moment. She is not 'bad' or 'mad' for doing it. You could invite her to talk to you about her feelings, or to call you if she is having a difficult time. But only offer as much as you can cope with, and don't try to take responsibility for stopping her from hurting herself.

Bristol Crisis Service for Women is a charity which was set up in 1986 to help women in emotional distress. We especially help with self-injury and have carried out a lot of research. We also provide information and publications, and training for professionals.



We offer any woman who rings our helpline the opportunity to talk through her feelings in complete confidence, without being judged or dismissed. More than half the calls to the helpline are about self-injury.

We have a range of publications, including a series of booklets:

Understanding self-injury
Self-help for self-injury
For friends and family
Self-injury support and self-help groups

Please contact us for more information about our work, training or publications.

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