

Understanding and Ending
Self-Injury
Michael Hollander PhD

Portland, Maine
May 1, 2016

Prevalence of the Problem

- Community Studies for High School Students
- 18% of High School Students (YRBS, 2003)
- 15.9 of High School Students (Muehlenkamp et al 2002)
- 13.9 of High School Students (Ross & Heath, 2002)

Prevalence of the Problem

- University and College Students
- 12% (Favazza et al, 1998)
- 35% (Gratz, 2001)

Prevalence of the Problem

- Age at on set of the behavior 11-14 years.
- Some evidence from community samples indicates that an equal number of boys as girls will self-injure.
- In clinic populations girls are over represented.

Non Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI)

- Deliberate injury to one's body without the intention to die.
- The behavior has very strong positive correlation with completed suicide through the life span.
- Often has damaging effects on current and future relationships.
- Fundamentally is an "effective short-term solution" to long-term problems.

Common forms of NSSI

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scratching
- Some forms of skin picking
- Breaking bones

Behaviors that generally don't meet criteria for NSSI

- Piercings
- Tattoos
- Eating disordered behavior
- Substance use
- Eating disordered behavior and some forms of substance use can have a similar FUNCTION as NSSI

Functions of NSSI

- Regulating extreme emotional experiencing
- Most often down-regulating emotions
- Up-regulating emotions to avoid feeling of numbness, emptiness or boredom
- Biological effects – it works
- NSSI is a powerful (negative) reinforcer

Functions of NSSI

- Core Beliefs are deeply held ideas that we hold about ourselves, about others and how we believe the world operates.
- Core Beliefs are resistant to change, in part, because we generally look for confirming evidence rather than disconfirming evidence.
- It is all too easy to develop Negative Core beliefs when you are vulnerable to overwhelming negative emotions.

Functions of NSSI

There is a synergy between the physiologic function of NSSI and a person's core beliefs.

Some General Characteristics of Self-injurers

- More emotionally sensitive
- Have immediate and powerful emotional displays that are often experienced by others as exaggerated.
- Alternately they maybe very difficult to read emotionally as they can be quite good at masking emotional experience.
- Have a more difficult time getting down to emotional base line.

Some General Characteristics of Self-injurers

- Have mood dependent behavior
- Appear depressed
- Anxiety is often part of the picture
- Perfectionistic
- Engage in other high risk behaviors
- Often have difficulty accurately labeling and identifying their emotions

Bio-Social Theory

- Transactional in Nature—things snowball
- We are born with an emotional system that falls along a continuum of people who feel all of their emotions but not intensely and those who have extreme sensitivity.
- Self-injurers are typically very emotionally sensitive.
- Social aspect of the theory focuses on how these sensitive people's experience can all too easily be invalidated. Often for well-intended reasons.

Bio-Social Theory

Major consequences of the transaction between biology and an invalidating environment:

- Compromised capacity to identify and label emotional experience
- Decreased capacity to modulate emotional intensity
- Belief that they are inadequate to solve life's problems, "defective"

Emotional dysregulation, without the capacity to self-soothe, is a terrible experience

What can you do?

- Thinking about this will take clear heads. Parents need to find a way to balance the intense emotions around the issue with firmness, kindness and the clear expectation that the adolescent will find a way to stop the behavior.
- If your child is self-injuring get a consultation from a professional.

Don't Forget

- It is important to remember that what you see as the problem (self-injury) the adolescent sees as the solution to a problem. (emotion regulation)

What else can you do?

- Important Skill sets:
 - Dialectical thinking and Middle Path Behavior
 - Validation
 - Problem Solving
 - Distress Tolerance

Dialectical Thinking and Middle Path Behavior

- The ability to see the wisdom in another's perspective even when there is much to say against it.
- To communicate that understanding in a real and genuine way while holding on to your own perspective.
- To find a synthesis of multiple perspectives.
- Tolerating the distress of trying to understand each other's minds and behaviors.
- It takes real openness and curiosity.
- Believing that truth evolves as more understanding unfolds.

Dialectical Thinking

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

- Certainty is the enemy of dialectical thinking
- Overwhelming uncertainty compromises thinking
- Assuming you know someone's intention from the effect their behavior has on you.
- Wanting to be right over being effective

Validation

- Validation is a critical skill for parents to learn and to practice.
- Everyone at times needs validation!
- Validation is communicating to another person that you have a tentative understanding of their emotional state, thinking or behavior.
- Self Validation is equally important.
- Validation is in the eyes of the beholder.
- Validation is not problem solving.

Validation

- Validation does not mean you agree or condone the person's behavior—only that you understand it.
- Validation is often offered with a light touch.
- Validation must be real and genuine.

Levels of Validation

- Attentive listening
- Reflective listening
- Given voice to the unspoken
- Validating in terms of a person's past history or biological disposition.
- Normalizing emotional behavior
- Radical Genuineness

Problem Solving

- Don't let your good ideas and wisdom get wasted because you rush into problem solving.
- Try and see if you can't get invited to problem solve or at the very least ask if the teen wants some help thinking things through.
- Try and offer multiple solutions.
- Remember that what seems simple to do may not be easy for your child.

Problem Solving

- Make sure you validate before moving to problem solving.
- Don't validate in order to get to problem solving.
- Remember that you cannot solve your child's problems.
- Don't abdicate your parental role when problem solving is called for by avoiding situations because they are likely to blow up.
- Avoid authoritarian control.
- You are limited in what you can do in terms of controlling the environment.
- Pick your battles.

Distress Tolerance

- Parents have to bear their own worry and emotional dysregulation.
- Take the long view.
- Radical Acceptance, willingly acknowledging the present reality (You only have to accept this moment and you cannot radically accept the future because it hasn't happened yet).
- Build into your life activities that bring joy, a sense of mastery and community.
- Remember that this is time in your life too. You will need to get nourished and replenished to be at your best for your child.