

Self-Injury

Self-injury is also termed self-mutilation, self-harm or self-abuse. The behavior is defined as the deliberate, repetitive, impulsive, non-lethal harming of ones self.

Self-injury includes: 1) cutting, 2) scratching, 3) picking scabs or interfering with wound healing, 4) burning, 5) punching self or objects, 6) infecting oneself, 7) inserting objects in body openings, 8) bruising or breaking bones, 9) some forms of hair-pulling, as well as other various forms of bodily harm.

These behaviors, which pose serious risks, may be symptoms of a mental health problem that can be treated.

- **Warning Signs.** Signs that someone is injuring themselves include: unexplained frequent injury including cuts and burns, wearing long pants and sleeves in warm weather, low self-esteem, difficulty handling feelings, relationship problems, and poor functioning at work, school or home.
- **Behavior patterns.** Many who self-harm use multiple methods. Cutting arms or legs is the most common practice. Self-injurers may attempt to conceal the resultant scarring with clothing, and if discovered, often make excuses as to how an injury happened.
- **Reasons for behaviors.** Self-injurers commonly report they feel empty inside, over or under stimulated, unable to express their feelings, lonely, not understood by others and fearful of intimate relationships and adult responsibilities. Self-injury is their way to cope with or relieve painful or hard-to-express feelings, and is generally not a suicide attempt. But relief is temporary, and a self-destructive cycle often develops without proper treatment.
- **Dangers.** Self-injurers often become desperate about their lack of self-control and the addictive-like nature of their acts, which may lead them to true suicide attempts. The self-injury behaviors may also cause more harm than intended, which could result in medical complications or death. Eating disorders and alcohol or substance abuse intensify the threats to the individual's overall health and quality of life.
- **Treatment.** The effective treatment is most often a combination of medication, cognitive/behavioral therapy, and interpersonal therapy, supplemented by other treatment services as needed. Medication is often useful in the management of depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and the racing thoughts that may accompany self-injury. Cognitive/behavioral therapy helps individuals understand and manage their destructive thoughts and behaviors.