

# Understanding Self-Injury

Self-injury, also known as self-harm, self-mutilation, or self-abuse is an intentional, non-lethal act of harming oneself in an impulsive manner.

## Why do people self-injure?

People commonly self-injure to:

- Resolve a disagreement with a friend or loved one, or any other interpersonal difficulty,
- Help deal with an intrapersonal conflict, like boredom,
- Obtain temporary relief from a negative mental state or feeling,
- Induce a positive state

Those who self-injure often report they feel lonely, misunderstood by others, fearful of intimate relationships or adult responsibilities, unable to express their emotions or feelings, and over or under stimulated. By self-harming, endorphins in the body are released, causing temporary pleasure and relief of pain, similar to how those feel when exercising. Without proper treatment, it is a self-destructive cycle. Self-injury also provides control over one's body if there is no control over anything else in that person's life.

## What do I look for?

If you feel as if someone you know is self-harming, look out for these warning signs:

- Low self-esteem,
- Relationship problems or avoidance of relationships,
- Poor functioning at work, school or home,
- Unexplained frequent injuries, and
- Difficulty handling feelings

Clothing often conceal bruises, scabs, scars, or other marks, and it is possible that inappropriate clothing of long sleeves or pants in hot weather may be worn. If marks are noticed, excuses can be made as to why it was received.

## Diagnosis Details:

The diagnosis linked with self-injury can only be determined by a licensed mental health professional. Self-injurious behaviors can be symptoms of other mental health illnesses.

## **Self-Injury and Suicide:**

The relationship between self-injury and suicide is complicated. Most people believe that those who self-injure do it with the goal of committing suicide; however, that is not usually the case. Although the suicidal ideation is not present, more harm than expected can occur, resulting in medical complications or death. If self-injury is prolonged or severe, a person may have desperation to end their lack of control over their addictive behavior, which may lead to the possible suicide attempt.

### **Treatment:**

The first step to treatment is to tell someone so you can get help. Treatment is based on your specific issues and any related mental health conditions you might have, such as depression.

Treating self-injury behavior can take time, hard work and your own desire to recover. Because self-injury can become a major part of your life, you may need treatment from a mental health professional experienced in self-injury issues.

If the self-injury behavior is associated with a mental health disorder, such as depression or borderline personality disorder, the treatment plan focuses on that disorder, as well as the self-injury behavior.

### ***Psychotherapy***

Known as talk therapy or psychological counseling, psychotherapy can help you:

- Identify and manage underlying issues that trigger self-injuring behavior
- Learn skills to better manage distress
- Learn how to regulate your emotions
- Learn how to boost your self-image
- Develop skills to improve your relationships and social skills
- Develop healthy problem-solving skills

Several types of individual psychotherapy may be helpful, such as:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)**, which helps you identify unhealthy, negative beliefs and behaviors and replace them with healthy, positive ones

- **Dialectical behavior therapy**, a type of CBT that teaches behavioral skills to help you tolerate distress, manage or regulate your emotions, and improve your relationships with others
- **Psychodynamic psychotherapy**, which focuses on identifying past experiences, hidden memories or interpersonal issues at the root of your emotional difficulties through self-examination, guided by a therapist
- **Mindfulness-based therapies**, which help you live in the present, appropriately perceive the thoughts and actions of those around you to reduce your anxiety and depression, and improve your general well-being

In addition to individual therapy sessions, family therapy or group therapy also may be recommended.

### ***Medications***

There are no medications to specifically treat self-injuring behavior. However, if you're diagnosed with a mental health condition, such as depression or an anxiety disorder, your doctor may recommend antidepressants or other medications to treat the underlying disorder that's associated with self-injury. Treatment for these disorders may help you feel less compelled to hurt yourself.

*All the previous information has been confirmed by*  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/self-injury>.

*Treatment information was written by the staff at the Mayo Clinic.*