

Explaining Self-Injurious Behaviors

What Are Self-Injurious Behaviors?

Self-injurious behaviors are behaviors that people intentionally engage in that cause physical bodily harm to themselves. Self-harm is often carried out when individuals attempt to deal with difficult or overwhelming emotions, and are not sure how to more effectively manage their emotions. Self-injury may take on several forms, most commonly cutting, scraping, burning, biting or hitting. Physical and emotional scars may be left as a result of self-injury. Self destructive behaviors are not to be confused with body piercings or tattoos that are sought for the purpose of self-decoration.

Why Do People Self-Injure?

Based on research, people who engage in self-injurious behaviors claim to experience little to no pain while they are hurting themselves. Rationales for self-injury include feeling anger toward themselves or others, or relieving pain, anger and tension.

Are Self-Injurious Behaviors Suicidal Gestures?

Not necessarily, but be aware. Individuals who engage in self-injurious behaviors are most likely feeling a lot of pain, and may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression. Since there is a strong link between suicidality and depression, it is important for concerned others to invite open communication about self-injury and suicidality. A common myth is that asking individuals if they are contemplating suicide affects their likelihood to attempt or complete suicide. Rather, asking about self-injury or suicide may help people know that you care about them and welcome open communication. If you have concerns about the endangerment of somebody's life, whether they self-injure or not, contact the ASU Counseling Center.

How Can People Break Free From Self-Injury?

Recognizing that there is hope beyond self-injury is the first step, and Counseling Services can be great support. People often fear that self-injury will be seen as shameful or secretive. It does not have to be. A counselor can be the empathic encourager coaching individuals to help meet their goals. A counselor can work with individuals to help increase coping mechanisms, and to provide support as people look more deeply at their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. By looking at factors associated with self-injury, and underlying concerns, many can begin to break free from self-injury. Additionally, seeking assistance from Health Services or a health care professional may be beneficial, as there is research that suggests that medication in addition to therapy may help those who self-injure.

For Concerned Others:

It can be difficult to know that ones you care about deliberately injure themselves. It can be difficult to not want to rush in and "save" them from their pain. People engaging in self-injurious behaviors need to be the ones making the decision to change their behaviors. You can share your concern, and urge them to ask for help. You can also let them know that you are available to call if they have the urge to self-injure, feel emotionally overwhelmed, or want to be with someone. Unconditionally showing them that they do not need to self-injure to get love and attention from you can be helpful. However, it is also important to encourage individuals to seek additional social support and not let yourself get overwhelmed with having to care for them.