

Counseling Corner

Do You Know Someone Intentionally Causing Self-Injury?

from the American Counseling Association

It can take a variety of forms: cutting, burning, head banging, self-hitting. Usually it's an adolescent, intentionally hurting himself or herself. It's a form of behavior that's difficult for most people to understand, but one that is more common than many people realize. University studies have found that intentional self-injury has been a practice for some 15% of the population.

Mental health professionals categorize this type of behavior as nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI). The goal of this type of self-injury is not to cause death, but rather is motivated by one or more of several possible emotional situations.

A self-injuring person may be someone having trouble controlling their emotions. They may not be able to understand and handle the feelings that occur when something stressful happens, and they react to this stress by using self-injury as a way to relieve or mask their emotional pain.

In other cases, someone may feel numb and incapable of experiencing normal emotions. They may use self-injury as a means for at least feeling something.

Professional counselors find that many people who are practicing self-injury are reluctant to talk about it. They may feel ashamed of their actions, or confused about why they are doing this to themselves. The result, according to studies, is that most individuals who perform NSSI do not seek the help of a professional counselor.

Instead, most individuals who receive counseling help do so as a result of being referred by others who care about them, including family members, friends, teachers or doctors. Those who do seek out help on their own have often reached a state of desperation, feeling out of control and realizing that they are becoming more at risk.

Seeking help for NSSI, or assisting someone you know who is self-injuring to get professional help, can bring significant benefits. While self-injury by itself is a difficult behavior to end for many individuals, a professional counselor can help the individual understand and deal with the issues that are at the root of the problem. Often these are past emotional traumas from the person's life that the counselor can help the client recognize and address.

Nonsuicidal self-injury can be a frightening thing to discover in someone you care about, but it is a treatable condition. Getting that person the needed professional counseling can help set him or her on the road to a happier, more productive life.

"Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcornet@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at counseling.org

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