

Understanding Self-Harm

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Overview

- Understanding who is Self-Harming
- Understanding the Functions of Self-Harm
- Differentiating Self-Harm from Suicide
- Tools/Techniques for Intervening

Self-Harm: Definition

“Non-fatal, intentional self-injurious behavior resulting in actual tissue damage, illness or risk of death; or any ingestion of drugs or other substances not prescribed or in excess of prescription with clear intent to cause bodily harm or death.”

~Kreitman & Schreiber

Socio-cultural Influences

- School & work environments are fraught with stress
- Emphasis on competition which is conducive to isolation and distrust
- Marketing OTC and prescription medications to alter mood, etc
- Emphasis on physical appearance and impossible standards of beauty

Adolescent Peer Group Dimensions

- Teens experience powerful emotions but lack coping skills to manage those emotions
- Peer group cohesion is enhanced by behaviors that adults condemn or fear
- Desensitization because of peer group's endorsement of body piercing, tattoos

Internal Psychological Elements

- Self-injury works; it reduces tension and restores a sense of psychological equilibrium
- Self-injury has powerful communication aspects
- Self-injury provides a sense of control and empowerment

Vulnerabilities to Self-Harm

- Depression (emotional lability, irritability, loneliness, isolation, hopelessness) ***
- Anxiety (weak coping and/or social skills) ***
- Impulsivity
- Low self-esteem
- Perfectionism
- Confused sense of self (including sexual orientation)
- Internal locus of control (self-blaming) ***

Vulnerabilities, cont.

- Awareness of self-harm by peers/family (contagion) ***
- Impaired family communication
- Hypercritical parents ***
- Violent/dysfunctional family
- Use of cigarettes, alcohol, & drugs
- Criminal history

Characteristics of Self-Injurers

- Interpersonal Chaos
- Labile Affect
- Impulsiveness
- Confusion about Self

Emotion Vulnerability

- High sensitivity
- High reactivity
- Slow return to baseline

Invalidating Environment

- “Poorness of fit”
- Child’s expression of private experiences are dismissed
- Child learns to distrust internal cues
- Child “ups the volume” to convince others that what they’re feeling is real

Explanations for Self-Harm

- To stop bad feelings
- To feel something, even if pain/to relieve feeling numb or empty
- To punish self
- To feel relaxed
- To give self something to do when alone
- To get a reaction from someone, even if negative
- To get control of a situation
- To get attention/help
- To feel more a part of a group

Functions of Self-Harm

- Automatic-negative Reinforcement: to stop bad feelings
- Automatic-positive Reinforcement: to feel something
- Social-negative Reinforcement: to avoid doing something unpleasant
- Social-positive Reinforcement: to get a reaction

Guiding Principles

- Don't react with criticism or horror
- Remain non-judgmental
- Understand that behavior is a coping mechanism
- Emphasize hope
- Be fast & efficient in assessment to avoid reinforcing
- Reinforce skills not SI or self-harm

Guiding Principles, cont.

- Validate the emotion NOT the behavior
- Contracts are not useful
- Tell parent/guardian and REFER
- There are effective treatments

Assessment Questions

- What problem(s) were you trying to solve?
- What other ways have you thought about solving your problem?
- What was the event, feeling or thought that preceded the self-harm?

Suicide vs. Self-Harm

“a person who truly attempts suicide seeks to end all feelings whereas a person who self-mutilates seeks to feel better”

~Favazza

Assessment Questions, cont.

- Did you intend to die? Were you clearly not wanting to die or did you feel ambivalent?
- Do you feel helpless or hopeless all of the time or can you cheer yourself up?
- What was extent of physical damage?
- Who knows about the behavior?
- How often are you hurting yourself?
- Are you carrying the “tool” to hurt yourself?

Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills

- Understanding factors that reduce effectiveness
- Saying “no” to unwanted requests & demands
- Getting wants & needs met
- Keeping relationships
- Keeping self-respect

Emotion Regulation Skills

- Identifying & describing emotions
- Reducing vulnerability to negative emotions
- Increasing positive emotions
- Decreasing emotional suffering

Distress Tolerance Skills

- Self-soothing
- Distracting, i.e. drawing, exercise
- Improving the moment
- Thinking of the pros & cons
- Accepting life as it is
- How not to make a bad situation worse
- Cultivating a willing response to situations

Friends & Helpers

- Reassure youth that adults can handle/help
- Advise youth not to tell everyone
- Advise youth not to ask “Are you okay?” or talk about behavior – instead spend time together
- Suggest that youth talk separately with counselor if worried

Parents

- Ask “What problem do you think your child is trying to solve?”
- Educate about the difference between suicide and self-harm
- Recognize heightened anxiety
- Get assessment but don’t assume that practitioners know how to treat behavior
- Inform therapist if already in care

Bibliography & Resources

- [Don't Shoot the Dog](#) Karen Pryor
- [The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook](#) Edmund Bourne
- [Skills Training Manual for Treating Borderline Personality Disorder](#) Marsha Linehan
- [Self-Mutilation: A Helping Book for Teens Who Hurt Themselves](#) Alicia Clarke
- [Depressed and Anxious: The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Workbook for Overcoming Depression & Anxiety](#) Thomas Marra