

Hurts So Bad

Why are troubled teens taking their inner pain out on themselves?

By Julie Mehta

Camelia had been in a fight with her mother. She doesn't remember now what it was about, only the terrible feelings that threatened to overwhelm her. Camelia went into the kitchen. On impulse, she picked up a knife from the counter and pressed it against her upper chest, just hard enough to draw blood. "It was a way to get hold of the pain," she said, "a visual realization of everything going on inside me."

That was Camelia's first experience with self-injury. Soon the 15-year-old was making cuts on her wrists and wearing bracelets to hide them. She pulled her socks up over the cuts on her ankles. "I knew I

was scarring myself, but I was so depressed, the cutting felt good. I felt like I was in a black hole and that this was a way to get out of there, to get back to a place where I could feel.”

Understanding Self-Injury

Now 25, Camelia didn't know back then that there was a name for what she was doing to herself—self-injury—and that other people were doing it too. But in 1995, Princess Diana of Britain admitted in an interview to repeatedly harming herself, bringing into world-wide focus a problem that had long been shrouded in secrecy. Recently, the issue of self-injury has surfaced in movies (*Thirteen*), TV shows (*Real World* and *Seventh Heaven*), and songs.

Still, many people have difficulty understanding why someone would want to deliberately harm himself or herself. Ironically, self-injurers are actually doing it to feel better. Whereas most people might cry when they're unhappy or shout when they're angry, those who self-injure have trouble expressing their negative emotions.

“Many teens who hurt themselves say that if they start to cry, they're scared they won't be able to stop. Or if they get angry, they're afraid they'll hurt someone,” said Andrew Levander, clinical director of the Healing House, a self-injury treatment program in southern California. For those teens, harming themselves becomes a coping mechanism, a way to avoid dealing with difficult emotions.

Experts estimate that about 3 million people in the United States engage in self-

injury, with a high incidence among adolescents. (The teenage years are usually when the behavior starts.) Experts also say that self-injury is more common among girls, because they tend to turn their pain inward, whereas boys turn theirs outward. But many boys harm themselves too, often more seriously than girls do.

Because most people who harm themselves cut their skin, self-injury is often referred to simply as cutting. But self-injurers may also burn or bite themselves, carve words or shapes into their skin, bang

their heads against walls, break their own bones, or pick at wounds so they're unable to heal.

Eighteen-year-old Joelle from Sebastian, Fla., began cutting three years ago, when she dragged an open safety pin across her stomach. Her verbally abusive boyfriend had made her feel worthless, and her parents were not supportive

when she turned to them, she says. “I'd been raised to think it was bad to have negative emotions, so I pushed them aside and put on a happy face,” she explained. “Cutting felt like a kind of release.”

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Beneath the Surface

Like Joelle, many people say they self-injure to relieve tension or to slow racing thoughts. “Some feel tremendous emotional pain, and cutting provides a brief anesthetic,” said Steven Levenkron, a New York City psychotherapist and the author of *Cutting*. Many self-injurers are perfectionists with low self-esteem who punish themselves for doing or feeling something “wrong.”

Some self-injurers have been sexually abused and hurt themselves in order to gain control over their bodies and a past in which they felt powerless.

Though often mistaken for a suicide attempt, self-injury is really a desperate effort to stay alive. Although a few people may self-injure to get others to care for them, most don't do it for attention but try their best to hide their scars. Camelia hid hers for years. "I was actually one of the most popular kids in school," she said. "I was on the student council, dance team, volleyball team. People would look at me like they wanted to be me, and I thought if they found out who I really was, I'd be alone."

The increased media attention has prompted more teens to seek help but also may have led to more experimentation. Levander says that the Healing House has had a tenfold increase in inquiries from self-injurers over just the past year. He believes more kids are picking up the behavior from others. Charla of Beaver Dam, Ky., started cutting at age 15 because her older sister was doing it. That sister had been molested by their uncle. Charla's younger sister had attention deficit disorder (ADD). Yet it was Charla, the one who didn't have an apparent "problem," who continued to hurt herself long after her sister had stopped.

Karen Conterio, cofounder of Self-Abuse Finally Ends (S.A.F.E.) Alternatives, a treatment program for self-injurers in Illinois, says that for every patient she's seen from an abusive background, she has seen someone like Charla. "Often there's a sibling with ADD or a divorce or loss of a grandmother early on, and the child becomes a supergood kid, like a parent taking care of the others but unable to express [his or her] own feelings."

The Downward Spiral

Whatever their reasons for starting, self-injurers often find that stopping is



Actress Christina Ricci has overcome a past of self-injury. "When I was younger, I did self-mutilate," she told the press. "I'd be upset, so I'd do it. It's a horrible way to feel better."

extremely hard. "I thought it would be OK to do it the one time," Joelle said of her first experience with self-injury. "But it became an addiction real fast."

Soon Joelle was carrying a pocketknife to school and cutting in the restroom. One day, she says, she "lost it" and cut all over her arms. That's when her parents noticed. She was hospitalized but continued to cut herself, using the zipper on her pants.

Charla cut nearly every day until one of her friends anonymously reported her to a school counselor. "I've tried to stop, but it's very hard," she said. Once a top student, she's had to quit school because of repeated hospitalizations.

Experts believe that one reason self-injury is so addictive is that it causes the brain to release *endorphins*, pain-triggered

—AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Emotional Relief

If you're thinking about hurting yourself, try to figure out what is triggering the impulse. What are you feeling? Then do something to match the feeling.

If you're angry,

- **exercise. Sports can help relieve tension. A walk is a great way to clear your head.**
- **rip up an old phone book or newspaper.**

If you're sad,

- **take a warm bubble bath.**
- **smooth body lotion on the places you want to hurt.**

If you're feeling disconnected,

- **focus on your breathing. Try yoga or meditation.**
- **bite into a hot pepper or squeeze ice cubes in your fist.**

Keeping a journal, listening to or playing music, and calling a friend or a crisis line can all help you work through whatever you're feeling. If any of these suggestions makes you feel worse, stop immediately.

Remember that self-injury can be very hard to stop without help. If you are hurting yourself, tell your parents, a teacher, a counselor, or a coach. Ask a friend to come along for support. If discussing your problem face-to-face with someone still seems too difficult, try writing a letter about it and giving it to an adult you trust.

chemicals that create a kind of temporary high. Cutters find they have to make deeper cuts more often to get the same effect. Sometimes they accidentally cut a vein or an artery, requiring a trip to the emergency room. They risk developing infections or spreading diseases through shared cutting instruments.

"[A cutter becomes] less able to handle things," said Levenkron. "Each cut in the body is like a cut in the mind too. You get more cut off from yourself."

Time to Heal

Fortunately, Levenkron says, cutters are treatable. The first step is diagnosing the underlying disorder. Levenkron treated Camelia's depression with medication and therapy after her cutting was finally discovered by her college roommate.

After her hospitalization, Joelle tried the S.A.F.E. Alternatives inpatient program. "What helped me the most there was keeping an impulse log, where I wrote down situations that triggered my wanting to cut," she said. "It helped me see how I was cutting to escape my feelings." All treatments for self-injury focus on getting in touch with feelings, finding new ways to relieve stress, and learning to build positive relationships.

Now Joelle's parents are her greatest source of support. Joelle has been self-injury-free for almost a year now and starts college in January. She's confident she's left cutting in the past, but she knows that the scars on her legs and stomach will always be with her. "They remind me of where I've been," she said, "and that I can't go there again." CH2



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Self-Abuse Finally Ends (S.A.F.E)

Alternatives

www.selfinjury.com

The Healing House

www.thehealinghousela.com

Secret Shame

www.palace.net/~llama/psych/