

UNDERSTANDING THE BEHAVIOR OF CUTTING

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It is estimated that 1 in 200 girls have cut themselves at some point in time, and that for as many as 3 million American young people, cutting is a serious problem. Even more disturbing is the fact that cutting is the sign of other underlying issues. It signifies a cry for help, but often that cry is not heard because family members are unaware that cutting is taking place.

What is cutting?

Cutting involves self-inflicting cuts on one's skin, usually on the wrists and arms, but it can be inflicted on any part of the body. It is a behavior that tends to escalate, and when that happens, cutting may progress to body parts that are less visible (to avoid detection), such as on the inner thighs. The severity of the cuts can range from superficial scratches to permanent disfigurement with keloid formation and even life-threatening injuries.

Why do young people engage in cutting?

Researchers say that 85 percent of those who cut say they do so to relieve tension. Young people are often under a lot of pressure from various fronts and they feel unable to handle it. Cutting is an unhealthy coping mechanism that helps them manage stress and other negative feelings. Ninety-four percent of those who cut report emotional relief after doing so; endorphins are released into their bloodstream when they cut and they experience pleasure. Some people say they even feel a high when cutting. This high is why cutting often becomes addictive. Those who cut find themselves having to cut deeper as time passes in order to experience that sense of relief.

Cutting is not done to gain attention. It's usually done in private, and most cutters feel their habit is a shameful secret that they do not want discovered. The more they cut, the more ashamed they feel, and thus the more they feel the need to cut in order to banish the negative feelings. Cutting creates a cycle of self-loathing and self-abuse.

Who engages in cutting?

Cutting usually starts between the ages of 10 and 16. About 60 percent of cutters are female, but 40 percent are male.

What are signs someone may be cutting themselves?

Cutters rarely ask for help on their own, and will often deny the behavior even when confronted with proof. Some signs to look for are:

- Wearing long sleeves in all types of weather.
- Unexplained bruises or cuts.
- Breakdown in communication, secrecy.
- Mood swings.
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns.
- Carrying unnecessary sharp objects.
- Poor school or work performance.
- Loss of interest in activities.

What are some causes behind cutting?

People who cut have often been victims of bullying or suffered sexual, physical or emotional abuse or neglect. They may also have eating disorders, severe anxiety, major depression or be bipolar. There may also be a history of mental illness in the family.

Cutting is a way for young people to gain a sense of physical control over emotional pain. As mentioned before, cutting helps them manage strong feelings that they don't know how to cope with, such as anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, frustration, loneliness, self-hatred, numbness, emptiness or alienation. It provides a release. It also helps them alleviate stress. Cutting can serve as a distraction from their emotional distress.

The pre-teen and teen years can be very traumatic as kids start dealing with relationships, figuring out how to fit in, face increasing pressure with schoolwork and exams, engage in more competitive sports, and deal with the challenges of getting into college and choosing a career. These changes are stressful enough, but if there are also issues on the homefront, then a child may feel completely overloaded and lost.

What are the dangers of cutting?

On the physical front, cutting does increase the risk of infection and deep cuts can lead to disfigurement or permanent injury. On the mental health side, the risks are higher as cutting often signals an underlying mental health disorder, such as anxiety, depression, being bipolar, or personality disorders that should

be treated. Cutting can also lead to, or be accompanied by, other concerning behaviors such as eating disorders and drug use, which again can be influenced by mental health issues.

People do not usually commit suicide by cutting. However, those who cut are at greater risk for committing suicide because they often suffer from depression or anxiety.

How can cutting be treated?

The first step is to approach the child. Try not to show shock or pass judgment, and avoid showing great pity. Simply reach out with compassion and explain that you understand what this is about and that it's time to get help. They need not feel this way any longer. A mental health professional can help cutters learn how to tolerate negative emotions and find healthy ways to deal with them. Breathing exercises, listening to music, writing in journals, and exercise are all tools that can be used to deal with stress in a healthy way. A mental health professional can also help identify any possible underlying mental health issues or other disorders and provide a treatment plan for those as well. Psychiatric medications can be helpful by treating the underlying mental health issues, or by directly reducing the sense of reward that comes from cutting. Cutting can be treated with time, patience and support.

Can anything be done to prevent cutting?

Yes, steps can be taken to help ensure that your child does not embark on cutting. First, acknowledge that your child does face legitimate stresses, concerns and emotional ups and downs. Make time to talk with them regularly about what is going on in their lives — not just their homework or sports, but on a personal level — what are their worries and fears; do they feel pressured about something? Really listen and don't minimize their feelings or concerns.

It's also important to let kids know that you are always there for them — unconditionally, and that they can always come to you no matter what the situation. If they are upset and not inclined to talk, try to spend time with them doing an activity — going to a game, heading out for a hike, or catching a movie. The important thing is to spend time with them, and the more time you spend, the more likely it is that they may open up.

Help your child build a strong support system with friends and relatives and through their school, church and community.

When kids feel well supported, they also feel stronger in their self-worth and more capable of dealing with life's ups and downs.