

Self-injury aid finds voice

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By Denise M. Baran-Unland Special to the Herald News

Radio personalities Seth "Tower" Hurd and Mallory DeWees from 89.7 FM were on the air talking about how body image motivates people's behavior when they received a telephone call that stunned them.

The man on the telephone said that he and his wife had just discovered that their 17-year-old daughter secretly self-injured herself by cutting her skin. The man begged parents to communicate with their children.

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Two more telephone calls rapidly followed this first one. They came from a 14-year-old girl who recently stopped cutting after two years of self-injury and from a 32-year-old woman who began cutting after the birth of her first child.

Although both Hurd and DeWees knew about the problem of self-injury, in particular cutting, they were shocked at how widely the disorder had spread through society and decided to do something about it.

"All week long, they talked to artists and experts on the topic of self-injury," said Justin Knight, station manager. "It's estimated that as many as one in five teens and 20-somethings are self-injurers. Prompted by the response to Plumb's song, 'Cut,' as well as numerous phone calls and e-mails we received, we decided it was time to take on this hidden epidemic, which has been called this generation's anorexia.

"I am proud of Tower and Mallory for discussing these relevant topics that are damaging young people's lives," Knight said. "Tower and Mallory have huge hearts for those who are hurting, dealing with the pain that leads them to this place in their life."

Common patterns

Participating guests in Shine.FM's cutting series included female vocalist Plumb (Tiffany Arbuckle) and cutting expert Dr. Wendy Lader of Chicago, clinical director of the S.A.F.E. Alternatives program (www.selfinjury.com), a 21-year-old program that helps people stop self-injuring behavior.

According to S.A.F.E. Alternatives, although self-injurers most commonly cut their arms or legs, they may deliberately harm themselves in other ways though scratching, picking scabs or otherwise preventing wound healing, burning, infecting oneself, inserting objects in skin, bruising or breaking bones and hair pulling.

What may complicate treatment is that many people now practice self-injurious behavior, making it almost a socially acceptable vice -- similar to how smoking is often perceived -- something lots of people do although they know they shouldn't.

"They think, 'all my friends are doing it so it can't be that bad,' " Lader said.

Although Lader does not work with cutters younger than 13, many of the people she treats admit cutting as early as age 5. It's amazing, she said, how many kids know other kids who cut.

Mood-changer

On the other hand, it may be difficult for people who do not self-injure themselves to understand the addictive nature of cutting, how it is not simply a childish bid for attention or a suicide attempt -- although cutters do have a higher risk for suicide and unintentionally harming themselves -- and how cutting actually makes some individuals feel better.

"The bottom line is that it does, almost immediately," Lader said. "An intense blob of emotions is a very uncomfortable feeling, and they often can't figure out what it is, just that they want to get rid of it. They learn that physical pain can often stave off emotional pain and helps glue them together temporarily.

"If self-injury works for them once, they may want to do it again. It doesn't work if someone isn't in distress. It serves the same purpose as the male that's angry, hits his hand against the wall and then feels better, or a woman who bites her cheek to prevent crying when facing her boss."

Part of what causes this unbearable pain in people, especially youth, Lader said, is our culture's tendency to interact in a shallow manner with people, intensifying many adolescents' feelings of isolation or that no one understands them. In addition, there is also other turmoil in young people's lives that is often beyond their control.

But the situation is not hopeless and self-injurers can get better. Although many different treatment options exist, many therapists will expedite the healing process by teaching cutters how to slow down their thought impulses, put their feelings into words and realize that when they do cut they are making a real, conscious choice to do so, Lader said.

Getting people to think is exactly the point of Plumb's song "Cut." Like the Shine.FM cutting series, Plumb wrote the song as an awareness tool for her listeners following an e-mail a fan sent to Plumb's message board.

"She said, 'are there any cutters out there?' and soon she had the whole chat room talking about it," Plumb said. "I thought, 'what a sad way to reach out to others so she doesn't feel so alone.' "

How effective was the series? Although Hurd said that many people contacted Shine.FM with positive responses about its cutting series, he hopes that self-injurers will admit that they need help and talk to that parent, pastor or teacher about the problem. But he also hopes that the rest of the world will take what they have learned as a wake-up call.

"I think during this week we were really just touching on the tip of a very dark side of society, and it's time not to be blind to this anymore," Hurd said.

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