

## The Thin Red Line

by Phoebe Reilly, 01.10.03

Some teenagers are waging a war against themselves. Their targets are their bodies, and the term for what they do is "self-injury."

Up until a few years ago, few people knew what self-injury was, and fewer still understood why it happened. But recently, self-injury has been getting a lot of attention in the media. In an episode of the WB's *7th Heaven*, Mary catches Nicole cutting herself in the bathroom. Actress Christina Ricci has admitted to burning her arms with cigarettes. And recent films like *Secretary* and *Blue Car* feature women who cut and burn themselves regularly.

Despite all the attention, self-injury is still an intensely private phenomenon that is poorly understood by most people. Self-injury is the deliberate attempt to cause physical harm to oneself by cutting, burning, bruising, or hitting. People who hurt themselves this way are not alone — an estimated three million Americans engage in some form of self-injury.

One thing many self-injurers have in common is a history of sexual abuse — more than half were sexually abused at some point in their lives (before the self-injury began). Others have been subjected to other forms of physical and/or emotional abuse.

Psychologists believe that this hurting is seen as a way to release feelings, calm down, or translate overwhelming emotional pain into something more obvious and physical, like a cut or a burn. Self-injury may also be an unconscious attempt to communicate pain to others — sort of a silent cry for help.

Self-injury often begins in adolescence. Our bodies and our feelings about ourselves change. Our families and almost everyone we know can change, too. People may start treating us differently — or expecting us to act differently — when we become teenagers. Juggling all these feelings is tricky, and getting comfortable with our feelings about all this can be pretty intense, especially if we haven't had positive support for expressing our feelings.

Some people deal with their inability to express their feelings by becoming rebellious, fighting with their parents a lot, or experimenting with drugs and alcohol. For others, dealing with confusing feelings and being unable to express those feelings can seem totally overwhelming and lead teens to physically hurt themselves.

Young women and men are both at risk for cutting and other self-injuring behaviors. However, the majority of self-injurers — 60-85 percent — are women. "Many women have a hard time communicating feelings of anger because anger is not considered 'feminine,'" explains Dr. Wendy Lader, co-founder of [S.A.F.E. \(Self Abuse Finally Ends\) Alternatives](#)<sup>®</sup>, the only national in-patient center for self-injurers.

Instead of expressing their anger in a "typical" way, women and girls, who are often very focused on their bodies to begin with, take their frustration out on themselves, physically. Many men also have problems expressing their feelings, and men are increasingly concerned about their body image. Eighty percent of self-injurers also have or have had eating disorders.

### Getting Help

Self-injury is not usually an attempt at suicide. In Lader's words, self-injury is a coping mechanism. But self-injury is an ultimately unsuccessful and dangerous coping mechanism — it's physically harmful, and because so few people truly understand it, self-injurers may find themselves alienated from friends and family, which can worsen feelings of insecurity and self-loathing.

But self-injurers often have suicidal thoughts and are at a high risk for accidental suicide — a cut can be too deep — which is why getting help early on is so important.



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Self-injury is a serious problem, but it's nothing to be ashamed of. If you or someone you know is a self-injurer, it's important to talk to a trusted adult who can help you find a counselor. You can also get a referral for counseling from Planned Parenthood by calling 1-800-230-PLAN.

Help and information are also available on the [S.A.F.E. Web site](#) or by calling 1-800-DONT-CUT (note: this is not a crisis hotline). There is currently no crisis hotline for self-injurers, but if you think you may harm yourself, call the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention 1-800-SUICIDE.

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