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Self Injury, A Topic Not Often Talked About, May Affect 3 Million People



by Don Corrigan
Columnist
write the author

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April 15, 2011

Darlene has been "cutting" herself for four years. She insists that she has no real friends and is constantly depressed. On sleepless nights, this unhappy teen will find a razor blade and begin a ritual of self harming.



Michelle Selinar (left), a therapist with Self Abuse Finally Ends Alternatives, said self injury is more prevalent than most people realize. photo by Diana Linsley (click for larger version)

Darlene's bizarre behavior is not so unusual as once thought. Self-injury is a perplexing behavior that typically afflicts teen-age girls, although these destructive actions can be found in either gender, at any age. Edgewood Children's Center in Webster Groves recently held an information night on the growing problem of cutting.

"About one in five college students have engaged in some manner of self-injury, according to a study by Cornell University," said Michelle Selinar, a clinical therapist and chief operating officer with S.A.F.E. (Self Abuse Finally Ends) Alternatives.

"It's taboo to talk about it. Young people don't want to admit to doing it, and parents don't want to admit their kids are doing it," said Selinar. "It's like eating disorders used to be - hushed up. But now we are learning more about it, and how prevalent it may actually be. It's estimated that there may be 3 million self harmers in the U.S. today."

Selinar said the continuum of self-injuring runs from excessive body piercing and tattooing, to cutting, burning and embedding. Embedding can involve the insertion of objects under the skin, ranging from pencils, staples and paper clips.

Self-injuring is not necessarily the worst of the problem, Selinar said. It's the psychological issues that lead to the self-destructive behavior and that are the root of the problem. Those issues must be dealt with to end a pattern of abuse.

Drawing from the S.A.F.E. Alternatives program, experts at Edgewood can be a valuable resource for parents whose children self-injure, although Edgewood gets referrals from many sources - including hospitals and medical insurance plans - not just from upset parents.

Edgewood is the home to the first residential treatment program for self-injurers. The residential program is designed for individuals age 12 to 20 who engage in self-injury. Two other programs include daily therapy

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Explaining Self-Injury

Clinical Therapist Selinar said there are a number of factors behind the self-injury phenomenon. They include the biological makeup or fragility of those disposed to such behavior; parenting styles that may cause undue stress on cutters; a culture of increased anxiety and unrestrained impulsivity.



"We do see a lot of females between 14 and 24 and generally they are bright, high-achieving women with some underlying depression and extreme anxiety issues." -- Michelle Selinar, Self Abuse Finally Ends (click for larger version)

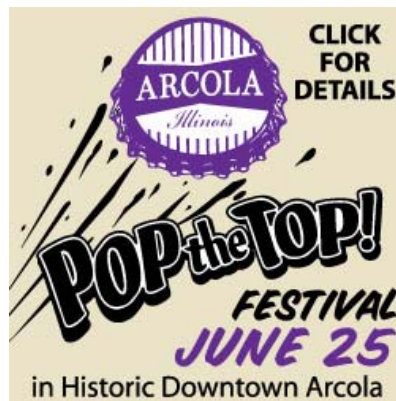
"The cultural piece is probably the most important," said Selinar. "We live in a very body-oriented culture, and young women feel particularly anxious because they are constantly receiving messages that their self-worth depends on how they look, how they walk, how they smell.

"At the same time, they are in this texting and social media culture in which rejection can be immediate and hurtful," noted Selinar. "When that happens, impulsive self-injury can be a way to cope with very intense bad feelings and inadequacy. It also gives victims a sense of control of at least part of their lives, when so much else is beyond their control."

Some examples of harsh rejection in a social media world can involve sending out a text, and getting no answer; finding out on Facebook that you were not invited to a great party; being subjected to bullying through a Tweet or an Internet posting.

Cutting may release certain endorphins in the body that relieve stress and help overcome anxiety. The healing process that follows cutting can also provide reassurance that a certain psychological healing or a rebound also is taking place.

According to Selinar, some cutters actually develop a regular ritual for their self-destructive behavior. This can include a favored time and places for performing injurious acts, as well as taking care to use alcohol and swabs to sterilize a body area before cutting. The body areas are usually sites that can be hidden by wearing sleeves or long pants.



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"One of several disturbing trends we are seeing right now involves a proliferation of YouTube sites on the Internet that provide a 'how-to' guide on various ways to self-injure," said Selinar. "There are more than 2,000 of these sites, and they reportedly have millions of hits."

Parental Pressures

Beyond cultural pressures that may prompt self-injury, unrealistic parental expectations can cause anxiety in young people. These expectations for high achievement may be typified by the "Tiger Mom Syndrome" recently highlighted in a Time magazine cover story.

These kinds of harsh demands can be overwhelming for young people. Flunking an algebra exam, failing to make the soccer team, floundering in a class presentation - can all add up to emotional trauma. Young people may find self-mutilation as a quick way of relieving that trauma.

Of course, some people are better at coping with anxiety than others. Selinar said differences in biological makeup explain why some people

Some said differences in biological makeup explain why some people overcome their frustration, while others succumb to self-destructive behavior.

Selinar began working with cutters and self-injurers, many of them adults, in private practice. She started with S.A.F.E. Alternatives about 11 years ago, and she said the increasing number of adolescents needing therapy has been alarming.

"There is never a situation that is exactly the same," said Selinar. "We do see a lot of females between 14 and 24 and generally they are bright, high-achieving women with some underlying depression and extreme anxiety issues.

"However, I've also worked with young men here at Edgewood," said Selinar. "I have a client who has been self-injury free for 10 months now. But when I started with him two years ago, he had serious embedding incidents which required surgery. He was embedding in every orifice of his body - terribly traumatic."

Selinar has been interviewed about her work on the Today Show, CNN, CBS and has consulted on self-injury documentaries with HBO, A&E and Women's Entertainment Network. For more information on self-injury issues, call 800-366-8288 (800-DONTCUT) or go to the website at www.selfinjury.com.



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