



Counseling Teens Who Are Self-injuring

I. Introduction

A. Definition of self-injury - *“purposeful, repetitive, non-lethal harm of self through things such as biting, cutting or carving skin, hitting self or slamming self into an object on purpose, burning or “erasing” skin, picking scabs (wound interference), pulling out hair, plucking eyelashes or bone-breaking*

B. Understanding self-injury - Princess Diana in a 1995 BBC interview referred to cutting her arms and legs saying, *“You have so much pain inside that you try and hurt yourself on the outside because you want help.”*

1. It’s nothing new – Speaking of the prophets of Baal: *“So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out.”* 1 Kings 18:28 (See also Deut. 14:1-2)

2. Why someone would purposefully injure themselves

a. **Emotionally** - A common thread seems to be **overwhelming feelings or overwhelming situations** in a person’s life. Because these emotional responses can be very complex, the motivation behind self-injury is what really needs to be explored and should NEVER be assumed. Much damage can be done when you try to help people based on your assumptions about their situation.

b. **Physiologically** - There are some interesting reasons why people self-injure because of what transpires with neurochemicals in the brain. God so wisely designed our brains to release mechanisms in the body for pain relief. Current neuroscience research on the brain reveals to us that emotional pain is felt in the same part of the brain as physical pain and can actually be seen on brain scans.

When we consider this, it makes sense that self-injurers are using the body’s natural pain relieving mechanisms for physical pain to soothe their emotional pain, probably without even knowing it. The danger is that just like prescription drugs can be abused, the self-injurer can become addicted to the neurochemicals that were designed by God to relieve physical pain. The body will normally regenerate after an injury, unless it’s a serious one requiring surgery. **But there is only One who can regenerate the heart and mind.** He has only one way to do heart surgery and that’s through His Word. Trying to relieve emotional pain in a physical manner will only numb or soothe the hurt inside temporarily, much like drugs or alcohol.



c. Spiritually, there are reasons a person self-injures. This is just as important to understand as the emotional and physiological reasons.

All behavior says something in regard to what we believe about God and our relationship with Him. (See Prov. 4:23) The pain and frustration in our lives are an opportunity to know God better. A reminder that things were not originally created to be like this.

We live in a sin-cursed world and have our flesh to contend with. The only way to truly be satisfied in this life and overcome sin is to have a saving-faith relationship with Jesus. Self-injurers need good teaching to help reorient their hearts and minds to Christ. J.I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, makes this profound statement:

“Knowing God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to New York City, put him down **without explanation** in Times Square and to leave him as one who doesn’t speak English or know anything about America, **to fend for himself**, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing the God whose world it is and who runs it. **The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it, a disappointing and unpleasant business for those who don’t know God. Disregard God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.**”

3. One youth leader responded when a group of young women confessed to self-injury after going through our *First Love* Bible study:

“I honestly thought that none of the girls in my group could possibly struggle with self-injury. To my surprise 3 out of the 4 of them confessed to having committed self-injury! It was an eye-opening group this week. One girl said she did it just once or twice and didn’t do it again. One girl said she stopped because it was becoming harder to hide it and her parents still don’t know that she was cutting. The other day she felt herself getting angry and began to dig her nails into her arm, but she caught herself and stopped. We went through Day 4 and walked through why each of them had been self-injuring. One said that her reason was anger. Another cut when she wasn’t in control. The girl who did it once or twice was punishing herself for her sins. They all understood that it was a selfish act and says that they sinfully believe Jesus’ sacrifice for them wasn’t good enough. This lesson especially spoke to the girl who was cutting to punish herself.”



A Word of Warning: Don't teach teens or their parents to "manage" their sin. I have heard of parents doing daily body checks, toilet checks (after they have been in the restroom), securing every instrument in the house that could possibly be used for injury, or even teaching their teen to wear a rubber band to "pop" themselves for a painful response instead of cutting. **God doesn't desire behavior management, but rather heart change through Jesus Christ!**

C. How to Build Involvement, Gather Data, & Give Hope the first session and beyond –

1. The first session – Just talk with them, get to know them, ask a lot of questions and do a lot of listening!

a. Start with... "Tell me a little about yourself"

- Where do you go to school? How do you like it?
- Do you do any activities outside of school?
- What else do you enjoy doing?
- What do you feel like you are good at? (This helps you know how they may be gifted by God to use in service for Him and others in your later sessions.)
- Do you like to read?
- What music do you like listening to? Who is your favorite artist/band?
- What movies/shows do you like? (Knowing their media choices can let you know what kind of content they are putting into their hearts and minds.)
- Do you have any favorite online influencers or groups? Do any of them have similar successes or struggles as you do? (Let's you know who/what is influencing them online. It can be good to "get to know" their favorites, not necessarily to rebuke them, but to understand what "messages" these influencers spread to their "followers.")
- How well do you get along with your family? Who are you closest with?
- Who are some of your closest friends at school, church, in your neighborhood? Tell me what you like about them. Do you guys ever argue/fight?
- What is one of your biggest hopes or dreams?
- Have you ever experienced a major loss in life? (not making the team, loss of a loved one, divorced parents, health issue)
- What is one of your biggest disappointments in life?

*Note: Be careful of having an air of condemnation in your tone when asking these questions. Remember, Jesus came to save, not to condemn. (Jn. 3:17) These questions should help you get to know them better (building involvement and gathering data).



- b. Be sure to ask questions to assess the danger of their self-harm.
- Set it up by saying, "I know you are here for an important reason. Can you tell me why you came to counseling?" (Let them state the reason. If they don't say that they are self-harming/have self-harmed in the past, then let them know that their parents love them and are concerned, so they sought help and encouragement for them.)
 - Don't ever promise not to tell something that is disclosed to you. In working with teens, if they ask me not to tell anyone, I say, "I promise to keep what you share with me confidential. However, I'm asking you that if you trust me enough to tell me, that you trust me enough to get help if I think it's necessary."
 - When you hurt yourself, do you have any feelings of wanting to die? Do you struggle with any thoughts of not wanting to live anymore? (If "yes," then ask them, "Have you ever thought about taking your own life? If "yes," then ask them, "Have you ever thought through how you would do that?" If "yes," to any of these questions, seek immediate help from your pastor/church leadership after the session.)
- c. Give Hope
- Share and discuss a hope-filled passage such as Ps. 27:13-14.
 - If you want to give initial homework, simply ask them to pray this passage out loud to God and work on memorizing it. They can recite it or write it out every time they are tempted to self-injure.
 - Close in prayer – Pray Ps. 27:13-14 over them thus teaching them how to pray it.
2. In the next session:
- How was this past week? What good things did you see or experience? What were some of your struggles this past week?
 - Share anything that you learned about their favorite music, books, movies, or influencers. (Do your homework by getting to know their "world") 😊
 - Share what God has been teaching you in your own devotional time.
 - Ask other gathering data questions you have been thinking of since your last session.
 - Tell them you want to understand more about why they hurt themselves by... (biting, cutting, picking, plucking... use the specific way they injure themselves.)
 - When did you first start doing this?
 - Did you learn it from someone else? (They may mention a certain friend or website)
 - What thoughts do you have right before, during, and after you do this?
 - Finish this statement for me, "If I don't cut myself, then..." (This may help reveal their motive for self-injuring.)
 - Ask them to recite Ps. 27:13-14 for you. If they can't remember all of it, ask them to share what they do remember of it.



- Ask them what, if any, insights they had this week as they tried to memorize or pray this passage.
- Discuss the passage together along with any personal applications.
- You can assign the homework of reading & journaling Psalm 139 split into 6 days. (Day 1: 1-6, Day 2: 7-12, Day 3: 13-16, Day 4: 17-18, Day 5: 19-22, Day 6: 23-24)
- Close your second session by telling them you are going to be working through different passages in the Bible for the next several sessions with lots of opportunities for discussion. Encourage them to ask questions along the way.

Trans. Statement: In your next sessions, you need to do a lot of teaching from God's Word with the goal of evangelism or discipleship. With any counselee, they need knowledge about who God is according to His Word and they need a god-honoring vision set before them. (See Hos. 4:6-7 & Prov. 29:18)

II. Give teens a good foundation of who Jesus is and who they are

- A. Present salvation through the gospel – John 17:3
- B. Teach sanctification through the gospel – Romans 8:28-29, John 17:17
- C. Teach them to have a Genesis 1-3 perspective
 1. We were created for God's glory – Is. 43:1-7
 2. We were created for His purposes – 1 Peter 1:2
 3. Yes, acknowledge that we are victims of sin – Gen. 3, Rom. 5:12-21
 4. BUT...we are also willing participants of sin – Num. 15:20, Rom. 6:23, Eph. 2:3, Heb. 10:26, Jas. 1:14-15
 5. Jesus came to reverse the curse. That's good news! – 1 Cor. 15:21-22
 6. We can live as more than conquerors (remind them of progressive sanctification; God doesn't just zap away our sin) – Rom. 8:31-39 – This is a good passage to assign as journaling homework.

Word of Warning: Be careful about throwing too much at them all at once. Remember, many teens haven't been in the Word at all. Help them get their feet wet, instead of fully immersing them in the Word or they might drown. Additionally, they may gravitate to a "works" mentality thinking, "I can't do this!", then feel overwhelmed, and quit counseling.



III. Teach teens to fight the good fight

A. Help them understand what is wrong with self-injury in order to have a desire to fight (live) for God's glory – 1 Cor. 6:19-20

B. Self-injury is about idolatry

There are three main **heart idols** that people are willing to commit self-injury for:

1. **Comfort** from emotional pain

The Answer: Deut. 14:1-2 & Ps. 119:76 – Looking to Jesus – The Prince of Peace – for comfort and healing

2. **Control** over their body when they fell out of control over everything else

The Answer: Heb. 11:6 & Eph. 1:11-12- Believing God and trusting in His Sovereignty

3. **Chastisement/Punishment**

The Answer: Is. 53:5 - Jesus was already punished for sin. There is nothing we can add to His punishment for sinners that will make it more perfect.

C. Teach them godly responses to their pain, lack of control, and sin

1. Confess, repent, and receive His forgiveness

2. Put off the former way of life, renew thoughts, and put on the new life
- Eph. 4:22-24

a. Fighter Verses to renew their hearts and minds:

Ps. 73:26, Phil. 4:6-9, Matt. 6:21

b. God calls them to be a living sacrifice, including good stewardship of their bodies
- Romans 12:1

IV. Teach them to get the focus off of themselves by serving God & others

Statement: Self-injury is an act of choosing to love yourself more than anyone else. The self-injurer's focus is on making himself/herself feel better by injuring his/her body. This is actually a form of self-love, not self-hate like many people think.



A. Understanding Biblical Truth about Self-love & Self-hate

1. Self-love is a worldly concept – The Bible teaches that we already do love ourselves by primarily seeking our own best interest according to the flesh.
– 2 Tim. 3:1-5
2. There is such a thing as self-hatred – The Bible calls it self-loathing and it relates to a person’s idolatry. - Ez. 6:9, 20:43, & 36:31

B. Present ways for them to serve God & Others

1. Teach them that they were created to love God with all of who they are
– Mk. 12:30-31

Ask: What are some ways you can show love and service to God? (Worship: praising God for His attributes, thankfulness, drawing near Him through prayer and His Word & serve others at church)

2. Teach them to replace their self-centered behavior with serving – Their focus has been on themselves, not the Lord or others.

Ask: When tempted to harm yourself, what can you do in that moment to serve someone else in your church, school, or community? (text someone asking how you can pray for them & look for an appropriate Bible verse to share with them, then pray, help your mom or dad with a chore around the house, help a sibling with homework or a project, do something helpful for a neighbor, ask your youth pastor how you can serve your youth group)

Conclusion: Come alongside parents with encouragement and share what you are teaching/counseling their teen. Encourage them to do the same homework you are giving the teen, so that they can be on the same page and perhaps spark good conversations.

Healing Hearts Ministries has youth materials that give teaching and homework on these doctrines with specific application to life, including self-harm, eating disorder, and suicidal ideations.

Browse our resources for youth and parents at: [HealingHearts.org/youth](https://www.healinghearts.org/youth)

You can find a sample of a lesson on self-injury as well as the Leader’s Guide section that coincides with the lesson at:

<https://www.healinghearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Sample-Bible-Study-Lesson.pdf>

<https://www.healinghearts.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Sample-Leaders-Guide-Lesson.pdf>



If self-injury is taking a turn for the worse, then extreme measures may need to be taken. Consider recommending a residential program to further support the family.

Residential Programs that ascribe to biblical counseling for youth & parents:
Salem 4 Youth for young men – Salem4youth.com
Vision of Hope for young women -- faithlafayette.org/voh/residential_treatment/

More Info. about Self-injury

Myths about Self-injury:

- Myth #1 People who self-injure should always be considered suicidal.
- Myth #2 People who self-injure have obviously experienced some form of abuse.
- Myth #3 People who self-injure are only trying to get attention and the behavior should be ignored.
- Myth #4 People who self-injure are only those moody, “emo” type people.

*The **TRUTH** is: Not everyone who self-injures is suicidal or has been abused. Someone who self-injures is not necessarily trying to get attention. Most likely, they are trying to express overwhelming emotions through outward behavior. Self-injury occurs across all socio-economic, age, gender and ethnic groups.

Look for Warning Signs: (a combination of any of the following)

- Frequent, unexplained burns, cuts, bruises, or marks on skin
- Wearing long pants/sleeves in hot weather or cuff-type bracelets on arms without removal
- Difficulty handling emotions or situations
- Relationship problems or problems at school, home, or work
- Long periods of time in the bedroom/bathroom w/ door locked, where evidence of self-injury can be hidden or disposed of
- A recent bullying incident or on-going bullying (monitor social-networking accounts and texts)
- Could also be struggling with an eating disorder (starvation/purging also forms body abuse)
- Obsessed with darker “themes” such as fantasy or occult
- Recent traumatic event, such as the death of a loved one

Other Recommended Resources

Watch Victoria Childress testimony at www.iamsecond.com. Search by name (See time prompt 3:10)

Booklets on the topic that you can read and then take the person through:

Cutting: Bleeding the Pain Away by Amy Baker. Faith Resources, 2006

Hope and Help for Self-Injurers and Cutters by Mark Shaw. Focus Publishing, 2007

Self-injury: When Pain Feels Good by Edward T. Welch. P&R Publishing, 2004

I Just Want to Die: Replacing Suicidal Thoughts with Hope by David Powlison. Out of print

Eating Disorders: The Quest for Thinness by Edward T. Welch. New Growth Press, 2008