National Alliance on Mental Illness

Self-harm

People often keep their habit a secret, but the urge to self-harm isn't uncommon, especially in adolescents and young adults. Many overcome it with treatment.

Whether a person has recently started hurting his or herself or has been doing it for a while, there is an opportunity to improve health and reduce behaviors. Talking to a doctor or a trusted friend or family member is the first step towards understanding your behavior and finding relief.

What is Self-harm?

Self-harm or self-injury means hurting yourself on purpose. One common method is cutting yourself with a knife. Some people feel an impulse to burn themselves, pull out hair or pick at wounds to prevent healing. Extreme injuries can result in broken bones.

Hurting yourself—or thinking about hurting yourself—is a sign of emotional distress. These uncomfortable emotions may grow more intense if a person continues to use self-harm as a coping mechanism. Learning other ways to tolerate the mental pain will make you stronger in the long term.

Self-harm also causes feelings of shame. The scars caused by frequent cutting or burning can be permanent. Drinking alcohol or doing drugs while hurting yourself increases the risk of a more severe injury than intended. And, it takes time and energy away from other things you value. Skipping classes to change bandages or avoiding social occasions to prevent people from seeing your scars is a sign that your habit is negatively affecting work and relationships.

Why People Self-harm

Self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior that indicates a lack of coping skills. Several illnesses are associated with it, including borderline personality disorder, depression, eating disorders, anxiety or posttraumatic distress disorder.

Self-harm occurs most often during the teenage and young adult years, though it can also happen later in life. Those at the most risk are people who have experienced trauma, neglect or abuse.

The urge to hurt yourself may start with overwhelming anger, frustration or pain. When a person is not sure how to deal with emotions, or learned as a child to hide emotions, self-harm may feel like a release.

Sometimes, injuring yourself stimulates the body's endorphins or pain-killing hormones and can temporarily improve their mood. Or if someone doesn't feel many emotions, a person might cause himself pain in order to feel something "real" to replace emotional numbness.

Once a person injuries herself, she may experience shame and guilt. If the shame leads to intense negative feelings, that person may hurt herself again. As a result, the behavior can become a dangerous cycle and a long-time habit. Some people even create rituals around it.

Self-harm isn't the same as attempting suicide. However, it is a symptom of emotional pain that should be taken seriously. If someone is hurting herself, she may be at an increased risk of feeling suicidal. It's important to find treatment for the underlying emotions.

Treatment and Coping

There are effective treatments for self-harm that can allow a person to feel in control again. Psychotherapy is important to any treatment plan. Self-harm may feel necessary to manage emotions, so a person will need to learn new coping mechanisms.

The first step in getting help is talking to a trusted adult, friend or medical professional who is familiar with the subject, ideally a psychiatrist. The more information that person can give, the better the treatment plan will be.

Depending on any underlying illness, a doctor may prescribe medication to help with difficult emotions. For someone with depression, for instance, an antidepressant may lessen harmful urges.

What to Do When Someone Self-harms

Perhaps you have noticed a friend or family member with frequent bruises or bandages. If someone is wearing long sleeves and pants even in hot weather, they may be trying to hide injuries or scarring.

If you're worried a family member or friend might be hurting herself, ask her how she's doing and be prepared to listen to the answer, even if it makes you uncomfortable. This may be a hard subject to understand. One of the best things is tell them that while you may not ully understand, you'll be there to help. Don't dismiss emotions or try to turn it into a joke.

Gently encourage someone to get treatment by stating that self-harm isn't uncommon and doctors and therapists can help. If possible, offer to help find treatment. But don't go on the offensive and don't try to make the person promise to stop, as it takes more than willpower to quit.

See more at: http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Related-Conditions/Self-harm

Updated March 2015

NAMI
3803 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 100
Arlington, VA 22203
www.nami.org
NAMI HelpLine: 800-950-NAMI (6264)
NAMI | namicommunicate