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Columnists

The Cure for Cutting

A Teen-tested System to Stop Self-Injury

by Alisa Ruby, M.A.

As Fall approaches and our children head back to school, they will once again be faced with the heavy pressures of adolescence in Los Angeles. One of the most insidious and disturbing behaviors teens engage in is cutting. Cutting is a form of self-punishment by people afflicted with ongoing feelings of guilt, confusion, anger, or overwhelming pain. In many cases, cutting is correlated with a history of sexual abuse, substance abuse, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The statistics are one in every 200 adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 19, regularly cut. Even though cutters are primarily teenage females, the disorder also affects males.

People who self-injure have not learned to identify, express, or release their emotions. They may have adopted self-injury as a strategy for getting relief from intense unexpressed feelings. They are unduly critical and shameful, which then leads to self-punishment for their perceived transgressions. Cutting can develop into a compulsive behavior, much like an addiction, to cope with life's ups and downs. The release of endorphins during cutting produce a "high" that cutters associate with the experience.

Cutting is not necessarily associated with suicidality. Although, there is potential for life threatening injuries when cuts are deep or become infected. Cutters often end up in the emergency room. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for groups of teens to cut and try to pressure others into this behavior to appear tough and cool.

What teen cutters and those pressured to cut need most, is support. Since cutting is associated with shame, the shock, anger and revulsion of family and friends can further isolate the cutter.

Several teens from a local treatment facility gave some helpful hints that helped them stop cutting:

Go for a walk. This will enable you to take a break from people and think. But be sure that you are "safe", that is, not carrying anything with you to cut. Watch a favorite movie or TV show. Something fun or inspirational lessens the need to hurt yourself. Play with your pets. If you don't have a pet, maybe you should get one!

Remember: It's all right to cry. Crying doesn't mean you're weak. Listen to music. It's easily accessible and you don't need to involve anyone else. Just listen and try to be calm.

Communicate your feelings. Tell someone you trust how you are feeling. Tell them that you think that you want to cut yourself. You don't have to tell them why you're feeling this way; it's enough to tell them that you are feeling this way. If they ask questions you don't want to answer, tell them you can't answer them right now.

Start a journal. This is a place where you can write your secrets and not have to actually tell anyone. Write in the journal as often as you need to.

The urge to cut and the struggle to stop is like recovering from any addiction or compulsive behavior. It is almost impossible to change without therapy. However, through one's commitment to the process of individual therapy, as well as family therapy, teens are able to make changes permanently and learn other coping mechanisms to deal with their feelings in this most turbulent of times.

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