

Self-Harm: Insights and Strategies to Build Hope

How you injure yourself is not as important as recognizing that you do, and what it means in your life. Self-injurious behaviour does not necessarily mean that you were abused as a child or suffered trauma. Often, it indicates that somewhere along the line, you did not learn good ways of coping with overwhelming feelings. You are not disgusting or sick. Rather, you just never learned positive ways to deal with your feelings.

When you feel the need to cut, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has brought me to this point?**
- **Have I been here before? What did I do to deal with it? How did I feel then?**
- **What have I done to ease this discomfort so far? What else can I do that won't hurt me?**
- **How do I feel right now?**
- **How will I feel when I am hurting myself?**
- **How will I feel after hurting myself? How will I feel tomorrow morning?**
- **Can I avoid this stressor, or deal with it better in the future?**
- **Do I need to hurt myself?**

If these questions cannot be answered, do not cut. Over time, you might decide to shift from writing out the questions and answers to running through them in your head. As you repeatedly respond to the questions, the answers will probably become more detailed and you will learn new things about yourself. You might discover that you can lessen or avoid stress, rather than run into it unknowingly. It *is* possible to be aware, and to deal with your overwhelming feelings without cutting.

If you cause physical harm to your body in order to deal with overwhelming feelings, know that you have nothing to be ashamed of. It is likely that you are keeping yourself alive and maintaining psychological integrity with the only tool you have right now. It is a crude and ultimately self-destructive tool, but it works. You get relief from the overwhelming pain/fear/anxiety in your life. The prospect of giving it up may be unthinkable, which makes sense. You may not realize that self-harm is not the only, or even best, coping method around.

For many people who self-injure, though, there comes a breakthrough moment when they realize that change is possible, that they can escape, and that things can be different. They begin to believe that other tools do exist, and begin figuring out which of these non-self-destructive ways of coping work for them.

Realistic Acceptance

- as told by someone who self-injures -

In my healing process, I did two things that ended up being very important:

First, I accepted cutting as a good thing. It helped me deal with things I otherwise could not deal with. It gave me a fast and easy release valve anytime that I needed one. It allowed me to swim where I would have once drowned. I primarily did this because self-injury is a never-ending circle. I would cut and then I would feel like I was bad. The guilt and shame was incredible, and I would cut again to ease the guilt. I kept continuing the circle.

Second, I acknowledged cutting as a harmful behaviour. I do not say "I want to cut" anymore. I say "I want to hurt myself".

Understand the difference?

I sometimes wants to cut, but I don't ever want to hurt. By replacing the rather impersonal word "cut" with "hurt", my mind was forced to acknowledge this as a harmful behaviour. We say "cut the turkey", not "hurt the turkey", and I was implying that I was an unfeeling thing to be carved up.

***I am not just cutting my flesh –
I am hurting myself.***

Material adapted from Kaye Randall's research on Self-mutilation (2004).

Self-Harm: Setting Treatment Goals

There are many possible goals that can help to stop self-harm, and encourage the development of positive alternative behaviours for coping with overwhelming feelings. In the creation of your own treatment goals, consider what you want to be different in your life, and what is important for you.

Do you want to:

- Eliminate/lessen the danger to self?
- Address other self-destructive behaviours in your life?
- Create a safe environment for yourself?
- Explore and develop safe alternatives?
- Improve your coping strategies?
- Improve your body image?
- Examine your thoughts/cognitive beliefs and restructure/reframe them?
- Improve interpersonal relating?
- Improve your self-esteem?
- Invite your family to intervene?

What are *your* goals?

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