

# Why Do People Engage In Self-Inflicted Violence?

People engage in self-inflicted violence for many reasons. These are the most common cited reasons, as stated by Dr. Alderman in her book *The Scarred Soul: Understanding & Ending Self-Inflicted Violence* (New Harbinger Press, Oakland CA, 1997).

## RELIEF FROM FEELINGS

One of the most common reasons for self-injuring is to get relief from intense emotions. Many people who self-injure are not able to regulate or control their emotions well. They may find it difficult to identify, express, or release emotions. They may never have developed the ability to feel and experience emotions as others do, such as crying, yelling, or screaming. People who engage in self-injury commonly report that before the incident they felt isolated, alienated, depressed and frustrated.

## A METHOD OF COPING

Many people use negative coping techniques to feel better. These include using alcohol or other drugs, violent behavior towards others, overeating, smoking, gambling, and self-inflicted violence.

## STOPPING, INDUCING, OR PREVENTING DISSOCIATION

Dissociation is a psychological state in which a person experiences an alteration in consciousness, memory, and sometimes, identity. Everyone dissociates to some extent, however, for most people it is fairly mild, such as tuning out someone who is talking to you. Some people use dissociation as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from overwhelming emotional or physical pain. But these dissociative states themselves can become overwhelming. Self-inflicted violence is one method to reduce, prevent, or end a disturbing dissociative state.

## EUPHORIC FEELINGS

When a person experiences physical trauma, their body releases endorphins which have effects similar to morphine. During a self-injuring episode, endorphins are released so the self-injurer does not feel the pain associated with the self-injury. Like morphine, these endorphins can become addictive.

## PHYSICALLY EXPRESSING PAIN

Many people who self-injure have difficulty expressing emotional pain. At a time when people can't adequately express their emotions, they may turn to self-inflicted violence as a method of expression. The result of this violence (the cuts, bruises, burns), serve as an expression of the internal conflict. Physically expressing emotional pain allows a person to have concrete evidence of intangible or indefinable emotions.

## COMMUNICATION

Sometimes self-inflicted violence is used as a form of communication. People who have difficulty expressing their feelings to others verbally may use self-injury to let those around them know what they are experiencing. Sometimes the violence may be used to carry a symbolic message. For instance, creating scars or wounds to mark a certain occasion.

## SELF-NURTURING

Some people use self-inflicted violence as an attempt to make internal wounds external and to nurture and heal these wounds. Once the emotional pain or trauma is made external through self-injury, it is easier to nurture and heal than when it existed only on the emotional level. The gratifying part of self-injury then becomes the self-care which a person can provide afterwards.

## SELF-PUNISHMENT

Research shows that many of the people who self-injure were abused as children. As children, they may have been taught that certain behavior, thought, or feelings deserved punishment. This lesson follows them into adulthood and may influence the way they treat themselves. Additionally, self-injurers are often over-critical of themselves. This internal criticism facilitates their acts of self-injury.

## RE-ENACTING PREVIOUS ABUSE

The reasons a self-injurer may re-enact abuse are varied. Some may replicate the abuse so they can feel a sense of control. Some may re-enact the abuse as part of post-traumatic stress during a flashback. Some self-injurers may not know why they act out the abuse, but simply feel the need to do so.

## ESTABLISHING CONTROL

Like everyone, when a self-injurer's feelings of control are lessened, their emotional and physical discomfort is increased. During these times, self-inflicted violence may be used to decrease the tension and ease psychological or physical discomfort by allowing the person a sense of control.