

SPIRITUAL CARE FOR SELF-INJURY

Q & A FOR PASTORAL CAREGIVERS

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What is self-injury?

It is the practice of cutting, burning, scratching or bruising your skin with the absence of suicidal intent. Young people around the world are starting to injure themselves at as young as 7 years old. Some youth start later in life, at around 17 years old.

Why do people self-injure?

Some people find it helps when they are feeling overwhelming negative emotions, like sadness or anger as it brings a release. Others who feel emotionally numb hurt themselves because they want to feel something. It can also help with gaining a sense of control and with expressing feelings that are too hard to say in words. For those who have been sexually abused, it can function as a way to re-enact trauma in order to tell what happened and to manage flashbacks. It can also serve as a type of “medication” for some people and can be addictive because of this.



Youth & Self-Injury in Communities of Faith

Self-Injury (SI) or self-harm (SH) is growing among adolescents around the world. A 2018 study out of the United States polled 60,000 high-school aged students and found that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 10 boys had harmed themselves at least once within the past year. In Canada, the stats are equally as concerning. The Canadian Institute for Health Information found that from 2009-2014, the rate of intentional SI hospitalizations for adolescent girls increased by 110%, and for boys 35%.

Is Self-Injury the same as trying to commit suicide?

No, it is totally different. In the psychiatric literature, SI has been called “anti-suicide” since the 1930’s because it acts as a way to avoid committing suicide. It is actually a coping mechanism that helps people to get through difficult times. It is important to be



What are the signs to watch for?

- Inappropriate dress for the season
- Frequently wearing wrist bands/bracelets
- Frequent bandages
- Carrying around implements like razor blades or lighters that they could use to cut or burn

Recommended online resources:

- **The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery**
www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/index.html

Excellent resources for parents, counsellors, youth workers, family and friends.

- **SIOS Self-Injury Outreach and Support** <http://sioutreach.org/>

Read stories of SI. Resources for loved ones and youth workers.

aware though, that if a young person says that their SI “isn’t working anymore” (as in it isn’t helping them to feel better anymore), this could mean that they might begin to self-injure more severely and inflict even more damage on their bodies. SI should always be taken very seriously as it is a sign that something is not right in the life of the young person.

How can I talk with a young person who I suspect may be self-injuring?

Talk to them. Be curious, respectful, non-judgemental and look them in the eyes. Explain to them that you are concerned for them in a calm tone. Because SI is such a private act, oftentimes young people feel ashamed or guilty about their SI and may worry that you see them as “bad” or “crazy”. Remind them that you understand that a lot of people use SI as a coping mechanism and you want to assist them with getting the help they need. Asking a person if they are self-injuring will not cause them to start to hurt themselves if they aren’t doing it already.

Should I make a referral?

Yes, always. As cuts may become infected or need stitches, medical intervention may be required. Referring youth to a trusted therapist or counsellor within the network of your faith community is always recommended. Its also so important to remind the young person that you are not abandoning them, you will continue to walk alongside them and provide them with the spiritual care they need.

What could spiritual care look like for youth who self-injure?

- Stay connected with them and check-in often. Also check in with their family members to see how everyone is doing as SI has a large impact on the family system.
- Provide supportive listening and a non-anxious presence when you see them
- Share scriptures such as Psalm 139 that highlight God’s love for them even in the darkest of times
- Remember that recovery from SI is a journey and relapses happen often. Recognize that healing is a process and takes time.