

Self-Injurious Behavior: A Cutter's Story

By James Michael Nieman

I'm alone in my room and I hate myself. The lights are dim, the TV is on, and the music is playing on the stereo just barely loud enough to make it out. Inside my heart I can't decide how I feel or if I feel anything at all.

So I stare at... then playfully glide... the blade of my knife across my open clammy, luke-warm hands. Now that the blade softly runs across my fingers I get the urge... I get the desire to feel something because I can't feel anything. I can't feel angry or sad or happy...nothing. Just me and a dark emptiness all around me...and a burning inside.

I touch the blade to my stomach. I press it against my skin with great pressure; I can feel the steel break the first layer of skin. I push even harder. Now I can see a little blood appear on each side of the knife. But still I feel nothing. I push even harder and pull it across my flesh fast, hard and without care! I let out a small grunt of satisfaction. Now I can feel something! The laceration is deep and has opened itself almost a finger's width when stretched out. I can feel the subtle tickle of my blood as it slowly and thickly flows down across my skin. I touch it, then smear it all over my quivering abs. I feel alone, but I don't cry. I shut myself off and wait. For what I'm not sure, but I wait.

It is apparent I have struggled with self-injurious behavior. I'm not going to tell you anything out of a book or even try to make sense of why people do this to themselves. I can speak only for myself as to why I struggled with my addiction to injure and scar my body. My guess is that most people who self-injure have similar thoughts and reasons for their choice of actions. Personally, I don't have one specific reason for why I do it. I have several.

For now, forget about what books, trainers, and doctors have said, taught or expressed to you as they probably don't know from personal experience, but from educated guesses and theories. They are trying to understand and have some good insight, but not all is accurate. It's pretty much impossible to get accurate on this subject as even the subject performing these acts on self can't make perfect sense of their behavior. To further explain, I'll give some reasons why I chose (and still sometimes choose) to do this to myself.

So...here we go. So many times I have chosen to cut, burn and/or hit myself repeatedly for such reasons as wanting some sort of sympathy or attention. I would cut my arms and stomach so people could see the wounds if I desired them to or I could hide them with a shirt if I wanted to conceal them.

I cut myself because I felt empty inside or a desire to see how badly I could injure myself without actually committing suicide. It's so hard to explain reasons why! I sometimes don't have a solid reason for the act. "Hurting" myself by burning, cutting and hitting doesn't really "hurt" at all but actually gives me pleasure and relief.

It is a way to feel alive while wanting to die. I didn't always want to die when performing

these acts on myself. So this isn't always a hint for wanting to commit suicide. The want for ending one's own life depends on the emotion. Usually the want to commit suicide comes from severe depression and anxiety. It comes from overwhelming circumstances and stress and confusion. Common sense and rational thought are blocked by extreme emotion - suicide thus becomes the most attractive and easy solution to ending the pain and brokenness in one's heart.

Without the release of self-injurious behavior, I believe that suicide numbers would increase. "Hurting" myself would give me temporary pleasure and help me to release the bottled and swallowed pain inside my heart. Without the option of wounding myself to feel better, suicide would become more and more attractive for my escape from this strange, unsettling "dream" of life.

Self-injurious behavior comes from many circumstances in a person's life. Mine is because of physical/sexual/emotional abuse as well as drug abuse. In the act of being physically abused I would get punched in face. It would leave a mark or a bruise (I tried numerous times to inform people that I was being abused but no one would believe me!). I didn't think the wound my offender left was big or visible enough. Thus, I would punch myself and bang my head against a wall repeatedly to make the wound bigger and more visible. I believed that someone would finally believe me. Sometimes it was almost orgasmic to injure myself.

Being abused physically, emotionally and sexually made me doubt my self-worth. I felt like no one cared so what difference did it make what I did to myself. Being subjected to pain throughout my life created an addiction to it. So if it weren't another "hurting" me, I would do it to myself as it actually seemed to improve my self-esteem.

Drug abuse was also a gateway to this behavior. Not only is using drugs self-injurious, it becomes a math problem with a bad outcome. Using drugs + self-injurious behaviors (cutting/hitting/burning) = extreme danger! Under the influence of narcotics I was much more prone to hurt myself since my body was already numb from the drugs. I thus would make bigger and deeper injuries on my body.

I really don't know how to make sense of this behavior, but I hope I gave some idea of why self-injurious behavior occurs. There are unlimited possibilities as to why someone would do this, including simple boredom.

Self-injurious behavior is dangerous and an addiction. The only way anyone can help the subject is to be open, listen, and show concern without using force or telling him/her they can't do it anymore. It is up to the subject to stop or minimize this behavior. I believe the best way to conquer this addiction is to pray and seek help and strength from God.

James is the 27 year old former foster son of Kim and Diane Combes of Colo. For more information on SIB, read the article "Self-Injurious Behaviors: Help Stop the Pain" written by Kim Combes, LBSW/M.Ed. (This article first appeared in *Fostering Families Today Magazine* Jan/Feb 2006)