



## **THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY GROUP**

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### **SELF-MUTILATION**

Self-mutilation has many different names and labels that people use to describe it, some of these include:

- self harming
- self-inflicted violence
- para-suicide
- self-abuse
- self-mutilation

#### **What is self-mutilation?**

One of the ways of defining self-mutilation is when someone causes damage by inflicting physical pain that alters their mood state. When people say 'mood state' they are referring to how a person feels inside. Moods can be negative or positive or neither. Some people self-mutilate because they feel disconnected and isolated from everybody and hurting themselves is the only way they feel real or connected. Most people would think of cutting when they think of self-mutilating. The reality is that there are many behaviors that can be classed as self-harm. These behaviors can include:

- cutting with knives or any sharp object
- burning yourself
- hitting your body with an object or your fists
- picking at skin
- pulling at hair
- excessive or dangerous use of mind-altering substances such as alcohol
- eating disorders

#### **Why do people start self-mutilation?**

There are many factors that could cause someone to self injure as a way of coping with the pain they feel on the inside. Most people who self mutilate have difficulty expressing their feelings verbally and may have a dislike for themselves and their bodies. Some people self mutilate because of low self esteem, difficulties with relationships and lack of communication skills coupled with mental health issues that may be related to depression and/or anxiety and stress. It is important to understand that whatever the reason is that you self mutilate there are other more positive ways to deal with the way you feel inside. It is important to note that harming is just one way of dealing with emotional pain and that there are other ways of expressing how you feel.

#### **Common misconceptions of self-mutilation**

##### **a) Suicide**

Even though suicide and self-mutilation appear to possess the same intended goal of pain relief, the respective desired outcome of each of these behaviors is not the same. Those who cut themselves seek to escape from intense affect or achieve a level of focus and usually feel better after the act of cutting. Whereas feeling of hopelessness, despair and depression predominate for those individuals, who intend on committing suicide.

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## **b) Attention-seeking behavior**

Self-mutilators are often accused of being attention seekers. Since cutting serves to dissociate the individual from feelings, drawing attention to wounds is not typically desired.

## **c) Dangerous to others**

This is a misconception as most of self-mutilators are functional and pose not threat to the safety of others.

## **Treatment**

Treatments to show effectiveness include art therapy, activity therapy, individual counseling and support groups

## **Self Help for self-mutilators**

- Take yourself away from the situation- something as simple as removing yourself from the presence of knives and razors works for some people.
- Try and focus on something around you rather than the pain you may be feeling. By 'grounding' yourself it helps to be more in control of your reaction to those bad feelings
- Make a list of supportive friends that you can talk to who understand your situation and call them when you feel you need to. However, sometimes friends can find it difficult to cope with, so if you find this is happening you may need to talk to a professional.
- Try deep breathing and relaxation exercises
- Write a journal-record how you feel and what might have made you feel like you wanted to self harm
- Hold ice cubes in your hand – cold causes pain but is not dangerous to your health.
- Learn to confront others, making your own feelings known.
- Make a list of reasons why you are going to stop cutting and set yourself some realistic goals to help stop self-harming.
- Call a crisis line if you feel that your behavior is becoming dangerous.

## **Looking Forward**

When everything seems too big to handle and you can't see any way out it can be hard to think about your future. When you feel this way there are some easy things you can try and concentrate on.

- The problems that seem unsolvable will change.
- Life is always changing
- You are in control of yourself and your surroundings

You have a choice about what happens to you and how you react to your surroundings