

Cut to the Heart

Helping the Student Who Cuts

by Jacob Youmans

Definition

Self mutilation is basically anything done to harm one's self. Including:

- Burning one's skin
- Cutting one's skin
- Pulling one's hair out
- Eating disorders
- Excessive scratching till the skin breaks
- Hitting, bruising, or breaking one's bones intentionally

This is a basic list, and when people refer to self-mutilation, they are normally referring to "cutting". But as you can see the true definition is bigger than just cutting.

Statistics

There have been very few statistical studies done on just how many teens partake in some type of self mutilation. There have been some studies done on teens who admit to being cutters, and they've found cutters tend to be young women who come from middle to upper middle class families...or maybe those are the ones that get "caught" and get help.

A study done in the UK in 2002 and published in the British Journal of Medicine estimated that 13 percent of girls 14-15 years old have participated in some form of self mutilation (that includes eating disorders). In my youth ministry experience, that seems to be fairly accurate; especially in the last few years, it has been a scarily growing trend.

And in my experience, it's not always the people you would suspect. It's not always the "Goth" or the "emo" who seems constantly depressed. Sometimes it's the "popular" kid. Or the kid who seems to have life figured out. This also isn't just an issue for females. Young men go through some of the exact same emotions and feels and find self mutilation to be an outlet.

What to look for

There is no exact formula for what to look for when someone has been cutting. Cutters are not suicidal. Unlike suicide, this is not an attention seeking device, it is hidden...

- It is hidden with long sleeves and long pants even in the summer heat.
- It is hidden in flimsy excuses for how one got those scars.
- It is hidden in brief mentions of feelings of depression or a withdrawing from the group.
- It is hidden in the withdrawal from physical touch that may cause pain from the wounds that they cannot control - they want to control the pain.
- It is hidden in cliques. But avoid "clique profiling". Just because they claim to be "Goth", "emo", "hardcore", etc. doesn't mean they are involved in self mutilation.

What to do if you suspect someone is cutting

- As with any form of "intervention", it is most effective when approached calmly from a significant relationship. Youth Ministers, Directors, DCEs, etc. are in this position, and can speak from a grace place.
- Remember, it's a deeper issue, not simply a matter of "stop cutting". Don't come from a place of accusation... "You've been cutting, I know it!"...but with a gentle spirit ask a question..."Have you ever thought about hurting yourself?"..."Are these scars from cutting yourself?" Again, the issues are much deeper than the cutting.
- This is not the time for "tough love", for yelling or giving orders. It's a time for listening, loving unconditionally, and ultimately directing to a trained professional.
- Seek professional help! I cannot stress this enough. There are serious issues at work here and a professional is needed.
- Maybe your church could host or start a "cutting support group", similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. In these groups

students can freely open up without any fears of condemnation or repercussions. Anything to show support and love verses condemnation.

Pray!

Never forget the importance and power of prayer! Pray with and over the individual constantly. Remind them you are praying for them. Shoot them texts telling them you're praying for them. Especially if/when the shame gets out, they need to know of the grace and love we have in Jesus! Don't let their relationship with you or the church change due to their self mutilation. Continue to engage them, invite and involve them. They need you now more than ever! Show them your love for them and most importantly, Jesus' love for them. The story behind the "golden rule" of "love your neighbor as you love yourself", is that we love ourselves. And when we see ourselves the way Jesus sees us, then we can truly love ourselves... and our neighbors! As with all difficult situations and circumstances, let us pray without ceasing. Pray they get the help they need, and if you're so bold, pray that God will use you to help them get the help they need!

Some helpful web-sites*

<http://www.selfinjury.com/>

<http://ulifeline.org>

<http://www.psychiatric-disorders.com/articles/warning-signs/self-mutilation.php>

<http://www.crosswalk.com/parenting/teens/11565978/>

<http://www.troubledteen101.com/articles48.html>

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