

In 2024, approximately 1 in 6 youth reported engaging in self-injurious behavior at least once in their lifetime. As this rate continues to increase, it is critical that Youth Peer Advocates understand what self-injury is and how to support youth experiencing it. Since March is Self-Harm Awareness Month, Youth Power would like to honor youth experiencing this through our article to raise further awareness.

Self-injurious behavior, also known as self-harm, is the act of causing physical pain or injury to oneself to cope with emotional or mental distress. There are many ways someone can engage in self-injury; however, some commonly known actions include cutting, burning, obsessive skin picking, branding, and bruising. Warning signs include, but are not limited to, youth talking about death or morbid subjects (including poetry or music), wearing clothing that doesn't match weather conditions, self-isolation or withdrawal, expressing feelings of intense depression, and frequent unexplained injuries.

A common misconception is that youth engage in this behavior because they are experiencing suicidal thoughts, feelings, or urges. Although youth who are feeling suicidal may engage in self-injury, there are many other reasons that do not involve feeling suicidal. This is called Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), as the individual engaging in the behavior has no intention of harming themselves to a lethal extent. It is crucial to remember that self-injurious behavior is a coping mechanism.

Another misconception is that youth engage in self-injury for attention. Some youth with this belief may bully a peer who has shown signs of self-injury. This belief is a negative stigma, causing a misunderstanding of the intention and underlying needs of someone engaging in self-injury. Youth engaging in self-injury may be seeking connection, as they feel isolated or socially disconnected from their family, peers, or community. Loneliness, isolation, exclusion, or being neglected by caregivers are some common reasons why youth might engage in self-injury.

Something often overlooked is that self-injury can become addictive. This is because the youth might experience intense urges or cravings, anxiety when abstaining, self-injury triggers, a routine or habit of the behavior, and feelings of incapacity to stop. A key chemical component of this behavior is the release of endorphins, dopamine, adrenaline, cortisol, and serotonin. This chemical release can provide the youth with significant emotional, physical, and mental relief, even if only temporarily. This can become addictive when youth rely on self-injury to experience the impact of that chemical release.

Coping skills for self-injury vary based on the reasons a youth is engaging in the behavior. Here are a few coping skills for each reason:

- Sadness: cuddling with a pet, watching a favorite movie, socializing with support systems.
- Anger: intense exercise, stomping/destroying recyclables, throwing ice cubes at a bathroom tub or outdoor wall.
- Self-punishment: writing a self-compassion letter, identifying positive characteristics, reflecting on past successes.
- Numbness or dissociation: loud music, holding ice cubes, incense, candles.

There are many more complexities regarding self-injurious behavior in youth and how this can develop into an addiction. As peers, it is important to be aware of these issues to effectively support and empower the youth we are working with. To learn more, request to participate in Youth Power's training on Self-Injurious Behavioral Addiction in Youth and Young Adults.

To close this article, I'd like to share two quotes that personally helped me in my recovery from self-injury. I hope they inspire and help others along their healing and recovery journey. "Healing doesn't mean the damage never existed. It means the damage no longer controls your life." — Akshay Dubey. "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." — C.S. Lewis."

About the Author:

Meghann Simpson is a fiercely dedicated advocate. She uses her lived expertise, education, and professional experience to reform and develop support services for youth and adults. Her lived expertise with trauma and mental illness, and her dedication to persevere ignited a passion to support others along their healing and recovery journeys. Meghann has dedicated herself to healing from neglect, sexual violence, interpersonal violence (IPV), mental illness, and addiction. Her personal and professional experiences have given her extensive insight into the need for trauma-informed supportive services. Reach out to Meghann at msimpson@ftnys.org.