

Cutting and Self-Harm

This is another in a series of articles I'll be researching and writing, dealing with common behavioural disorders that teachers may see in their classrooms.

Sometimes people harm themselves on purpose. Often it will be by cutting themselves.

They do it when they're feeling hurt, or overwhelmed by life. It helps them to express how they feel when they can't put their thoughts into words. It's a distraction, one that helps them take their mind off problems which may seem insurmountable. It helps them feel better.

But the painful feelings always return, and the person may find that they have to cut themselves again and again, to get relief.

Harming yourself to feel better is like an addiction. The person doing it may not know how to stop. It may be the only thing they have that helps keep them from a complete breakdown.

Often the results of cutting don't show. Because the person doing it has found cutting necessary to help relieve their inner pain, it's often the case that they aren't talking to anyone about what is bothering them. You may never realize that anything is wrong. The person may be highly intelligent and outgoing; in all respects they may seem quite normal and well-adjusted. But they're still cutting themselves.

We've had several students here, over the years, who've done that. There was no way to tell. They mostly kept it all inside.

Self-harm is how some people deal with distress and emotional pain. Hurting themselves makes them feel better. It's the only way they know to cope with feelings of sadness, self-loathing, emptiness, guilt, or rage.

People who do it try to keep it secret. They aren't looking for attention. They're probably ashamed of what they're doing. They think that no-one will understand. But cutting themselves only provides temporary relief; it doesn't deal with the causes.

Many people who hurt themselves this way may suffer from anxiety or depression. Something in their life may be very upsetting, and they don't know how to deal with it. Self-injury is how they cope.

While people who cut themselves are not necessarily suicidal ... in fact, the cutting may be an attempt to keep on surviving ...it is true that people who cut themselves have a much higher risk of suicide. That's another reason why it's important for teachers to identify students who are doing it, and to get them help.

The wounds from the cutting may be minor. They may heal quickly. But it's what's inside that is crippling them.

Self-harm isn't always cutting yourself. It can include intentional scratching or burning of the skin, hitting yourself or banging your head, punching things, sticking objects into your skin, intentionally preventing wounds from healing, or swallowing poisonous substances or inappropriate objects.

Self-harm can also manifest itself as risky or harmful behaviours, in older students. Typical examples include driving recklessly, excessive and repeated drinking, drug use, having unsafe sex, or overtly promiscuous behaviour.

High school teachers see that all the time. Sometimes it's easy to tell who is frustrated by life, or having relationship problems, or experiencing a family breakup.

As teachers, we need to watch for behaviours that may be indicators of students who are having problems. But if the problem manifests itself as cutting, and these students are ashamed of cutting themselves and try to hide it, and won't talk about what's bothering them, how can we help?

There *are* some things to look for:

- Unexplained repeated wounds, scars or bruises may be an indication of self-hurting. Often the cutting is done on the wrists, arms, thighs or chest.
- Blood stains on clothing, tissues or towels

- Sharp objects, such as razors, knives, needles, glass shards, or bottle caps, in the person's possessions.
- Frequent 'accidents' that explain away injuries
- Covering up arms and legs with long sleeves and pants, even in hot weather
- Refusing to change for PhysEd
- Wanting to be alone for long periods of time, especially in the bedroom or bathroom
- Irritability

As teachers, one of the most important things we can do is to be open with students. You need to build relationships with them. They need to know that it's safe to talk to you, and that you will understand their problems, and listen with a sympathetic ear, without being judgmental.

If you have this sort of relationship with your students, it may be that someone who is hurting themselves may turn to you for help. Or some other student, who is aware of the problem, may tell you.

Students who are identified as ones who are hurting themselves need professional help. Teachers can direct these kids and their parents toward someone who can provide it.

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I researched this article pretty carefully, but remember that, as a teacher, I am not an expert in mental disorders. If you suspect anxiety disorders, depression, or thoughts of suicide in a child or teenager you know, get professional help. Don't wait.