Self Injury/Self Mutilation: Critical Issues

Thursday, February 16, 2012

Welcome!

Thank you for joining us. We have a great many participants in today’s call. Your phone is currently muted so that the noise level can be kept to a minimum. If you have not yet joined the audio portion of this webinar, please click on Communicate at the top of your screen, and then Join Teleconference. The dial-in information will appear. If you have any questions, you can send them to the host using the Chat feature in the bottom right corner during the webinar.

The webinar will start at 9:00 AM.
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• Julie was dared to burn herself at a middle school sleep over

• She felt a small rush and a sense of power

• Three months later after an argument with her friend she saw a candle and knew immediately what she wanted to do
Scenario for Teacher

• You have noticed Julie, one of your students who has never worn a short sleeve shirt has bandaged forearms on several occasions

• What should you do?
Self Mutilation Definition Issues

• Multitude of terms

• Distinguished from culturally sanctioned (intent and purpose)

• Major type infrequent/severe associated with psychotic population

• Stereotypic such as head banging/biting assoc. w. developmentally disabled

• Moderate/superficial such as cutting found in non-hospitalized and “normal population”

• Preference for Self Injury Term
Repetitive Self Mutilation/Self Injury Syndrome

• Recurrent failure to resist impulses to harm one’s body physically without suicidal intent—Favazza

• New Axis I has been proposed RSM/RSI
Associated Diagnoses

• Borderline Personality
• Mood and Anxiety Disorder
• Impulse Control Disorder
Understanding and Responding to Students who Self-Injure

- Very complex behavior that fulfills a multitude of needs
- Contagious: often runs in peer groups
- Respond individually
- Assess for suicide risk as estimates are up to 50% are suicidal
Contagion

• Rite of togetherness
• Popularized by movies such as “Thirteen”
• Separate the dominant female
• Individual counseling preferred over group
• My body expresses what words can not!
Understanding and Responding to Students who Self-Injure

• Warn and involve parents
• Increase circle of care and involve school nurse
• Assess for co-morbidity
• Utilize school/community resources
• Do not demand self harm stop or get into power struggles----focus on reducing it and the underlying behavior
• Do teach substitute behaviors that focus on help-seeking/communication skills, reduction of tension and isolation
Suicide Vs. Self Injury

- Suicide---want to end all feelings
- Precipitating event
- One method
- Give advance warning
- Pain unendurable-persistent
- Less frequent
- Assess for suicide risk
- Use No Harm contract
- Notification of parent essential
- Referral

- Self Mutilation---want to feel better
- Precipitating event
- Multiple methods
- Rarely give warning
- Pain uncomfortable-intermittent
- Repeat behavior
- Assess for suicide risk
- Use No Harm contract
- Controversy parent notification
- Referral
Self-Injury

• There is diversity among those who self-injure

• Associated with: sexual abuse, emotional abuse, attachment disorder, substance abuse and eating disorders

• Similarities are in trauma and some event has been difficult to process leaving emotional scars
Cutting Often Associated With

- Adolescent girls
- Affluence
- Girls present as likable, intelligent and functional
- Under high stress—can’t think—feel powerless and angry
- Often have difficulty verbalizing feelings
New Breed (Walsh 2006)

• Normal attitude towards body image without hatred/alienation
• Onset ages 11 or 12 use single method
• 2 to 1 female wide range backgrounds
• No history of psychiatric treatment
• More receptive to treatment
Safety Contract and SI

- Helps student to take control over impulses
- Increases connection with adults
- Provides alternatives/replacement behaviors
- Reduces anxiety
- Hotline numbers 800-SUICIDE and 800 DONTCUT
- Include asking them not to talk with friends about SI
Theories

• Releases Endorphins

• Helps Regulate Emotions

• Anger Directed Inward for Catharsis
Case Situation

• A teacher has referred a 13 year old girl to you, the counselor for self-injury concerns.

• The girl readily admits to you that following an argument at home she cut her arm last night to feel better and shows you the bandages.

• You are the counselor-- what do you do as she begs you not to tell her parents?
Another Scenario

• Another student has been referred to the counselor for depression and anxiety.

• The 13 year old admits to cutting in the past and shows you an old scar and states that she doesn’t do it anymore.

• What do you do?
Confidentiality Suggestions

• Clarify limits
• Model importance of parent communication
• Practice within limits of abilities
• Know ethics and relevant laws
• Keep records
• Maintain liability coverage
• Develop local guidelines
Self Injury

- Surveys have found up to 18% of adolescents engage in it
- Usually begins and ends in adolescence
- Majority are female
- Often associated with sexual abuse, family violence, PTSD and eating disorders
- Triggers: recent loss, peer conflict and intimacy problems
Lawsuit over Notification

• Coulter Vs. Washington Township
• Issues
  • Student deposition/insight into factors
  • Parent deposition
  • Counselor deposition
What Do Kids Report?

- Want to feel concrete pain when psychological pain is overwhelming
- Reduces numbness
- Keeps trauma from intruding
- I cut so I will not kill myself
- Gets attention of others
- Discharges tension, anger and despair
- Gain a sense of control
- Punish myself
- Cutting is better than going out and getting drunk
Excerpts from Cutter’s Poem

• “Turn up the music and set the mood
• Once is never enough
• Quivering with anticipation
• Watch it the drop spills over and runs down my arm
• Crimson orgasm---you seduce me every time Mr. Knife”
• Sight of blood flow is central to experience
Helping Those Who Self Injure

• Care about the person and the pain behind the injury

• Respect their efforts to cope

• Emphasize it is important to talk about it and SI can be understood and overcome

• Recognize it takes a long time for individuals to give up SI
Helpful Counselor Response

• Matter of fact
• Low key but compassionate
• Respectful curiosity
• Encourage parents to focus on stress child is experiencing
• Know community resources
Strategies Students Suggest

• Carry safe stuff---stress relievers
• Find something to do –keep brain & hands busy
• Journaling
• Collage work
• Call friend----suck on hot candy
• Snap a rubber band
More Suggestions

• Get sensory input---aromatherapy, lip balm or lotions
• Scribble with red crayon on arm or paper
• Brush skin with toothbrush
• Get exercise---carry skates with me
• Make a list of surroundings and details for reality check
Additional Suggestions

• Tear paper
• Use play-dough
• Brush teeth and hair
• Squeeze stress balls
• Scribble on paper
• Take hot shower
• Scratch clothes
What Can Support Staff Do?

- Increase faculty awareness
- Dispel the myth that it is only for attention
- Instruct students on dangers of sharing blades etc. and the importance of getting adult help if a friend is cutting
- Increase student coping skills
- Increase student impulse control
Factors To Reduce Self Injury

• Help students develop the ability to identify and express feeling verbally

• Increase their use of behavioral alternatives

• Recognize that adults attempting to intervene are often very distressed by this behavior and only demand it stop!

• Provide prevention activities such as group counseling for at risk students prior to their engaging in self injury
No single treatment identified in the literature as most effective

Combination of medication and therapy most effective
Promising Therapies—progress is slow

• Dialectical Behavior Therapy---skill training for mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation and distress tolerance

• Frequent contact and record keeping such as diaries to help manage emotions and understand triggers for SI

• Family educated and involved as ally for assessment and intervention
Web Sites

- www.selfharm.org
- www.self-abuse.com
- www.twloha.com
Video where I interviewed two young women about their struggle with SI

- Self Injury: Insight, testimony and critical issues from state of Florida

http://centerforchildwelfare.fmhi.usf.edu/videos/Pages/cms.aspx
Other Resources

- Bullying: Recognition and Response
- Workplace Bullying
- Youth Suicide: Awareness & Prevention
- Youth Suicide: Aware/ Prev (Jason Flatt Act)
- Online Safety Overview
- Online Safety: Cyberbullying
- Online Safety: Predators
- Online Safety: Threats of Violence
- Dating Violence: Identification/ Prevention
- Diversity Awareness: Staff to Student
- Sexual Harassment: Student Issues

- Age-appropriate K-12 classroom lesson plans
- Downloadable parent/student information
- Goal: Keeping kids safe online
Questions?

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More Questions?

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Thank you for your participation!

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