

Bleeding Hearts, Wounded Souls

Thousands of people, especially teen girls, cut themselves to cope with personal pain. Christian experts tell us how the church can offer healing.

In an ordinary house in a quiet suburb, a troubled young girl slips into her bedroom and closes the door behind herself. She slides down to the floor next to her bed, her young heart twisted and torn.

School is demanding and friends are pressuring her.

Parents seem preoccupied, church feels irrelevant. As fear and loneliness well up inside, the girl reaches for a small, hidden knife. With a shaky hand, she raises it to her arm and slowly cuts a careful line into her skin, watching the warm blood begin to flow.

As always, a strange calm takes over-like a drug-induced high-and for a brief moment she feels a sense of mastery over her pain. Then the high betrays her, quickly swallowed up by a rush of confusion and shame.

Lost in a world of adult emotions, she feels overwhelmed and tries to make sense of her inner turmoil by bringing it to the surface. The problem is, her pain is invisible, and she wants to make it real.

Self-injury, often called “self-cutting” or just “cutting,” is a curiously increasing phenomenon in today’s youth culture. Although it can involve any kind of self-violence, such as

hair-pulling or burning oneself, psychologists are beginning to focus on the rising trend of teens and young adults who intentionally cut themselves as a way of dealing with emotional pain.

Cutting is not an attempt at suicide, experts say. Usually done in secret, it's often described as a form of self-medication or self-punishment used by those who have trouble connecting with their emotions. It may begin with excessive scratching, psychologists say, but it can become progressive and addictive, leading to dangerous cutting, scarring, infection and even accidental death.

Because of its bizarre nature, cutters often hide their scars and keep their behavior behind closed doors. Although experts say the trend is growing to dangerous levels within the youth culture, statistics are vague because much of it is unreported.

Hurts So Good

As destructive as drugs and alcohol are, their temporary high is a temptation to youth and adults alike. But for most people, it's inconceivable that self-mutilation would provide any sort of relief. So what's the motivation?

"The momentary pleasure serves as a coping mechanism," says author and popular Christian psychologist Linda Mintle, Ph.D. "It serves as a distraction from what other pain they're feeling."

Some teens use it to cope with the pain of treatment for serious medical conditions. But Mintle says cutting usually is

tied to a mood disorder such as depression. "It's about feeling overwhelmed, feeling out of control," she explains. For some people, self-injury is a fleeting high. The brain releases endorphins, which provide a strange sense of calm. Others would rather trade their emotional numbness for self-inflicted physical pain because, as one cutter put it, "At least I know I'm alive."

"It was painful, but yes, there was a kind of high feeling," says Lauren (not her real name), describing her first experience with cutting at the age of 18. "I thought, Hey, I'm master of my emotions, and it makes me feel good."

She says a wave of shame quickly followed the high, although it wasn't enough to stop her. "It was very hard to stop," she says.

Some people say self-cutting is rising to epidemic proportions among today's youth, including Christian kids who grew up in the church. "I wouldn't say that's an exaggeration," says José Cano, staff counselor at Teen Mania's Honor Academy, a national youth ministry based in Garden Valley, Texas. "There is a lot of emphasis on it among our teens."

Cano notes that different cycles of addiction rear up within the youth culture of each generation, from alcohol and drugs to food and gambling. "[Cutting] does carry some trend to it for those people who are looking to try something new," Cano explains. "Kids hear about it and start experimenting with it. It's not for everybody, but others will find release through cutting, and then they become addicted to it."

Despite its shock value, cutting is not generally linked to

body piercing or tattooing, experts say, because self-injury is more about emotional disconnection than attention-seeking. A child who grows up unable to identify or accept or express her feelings may begin to seek familiar pain in the physical realm.

“It’s dangerous, whether it is a peer pressure thing or not ... so I treat all of it the same,” says Laurie Haddow, a licensed professional counselor at Christian Psychological Center in Memphis, Tennessee.

Whether fad or fancy, the behavior is a self-destructive cry for help. “I’ve heard clients say that if someone is a burn victim, they have the scar to prove it,” Haddow says. “[Cutting] is evidence that I’m feeling this way inside.”

A Generation in Pain

Despite this rising trend, many parents, teachers and even youth pastors are ill equipped to deal with what they consider bizarre behavior. Psychologists and counselors say adults need to identify the danger signals.

Cano’s three-part article titled “Self-Injury,” published on Teen Mania’s Web site ([http://www.teenmania.com](#)), is a comprehensive Christian resource on the topic. In his research, Cano has identified some personality characteristics common to self-cutters, including inability to handle or express emotions, perfectionism, severe mood swings and low self-esteem or poor body image.

These may sound like typical adolescent struggles, but he says when a child also lacks healthy coping skills and

relationships, she may succumb to destructive behavior. "Cutting will really speak your story because it looks and feels ugly, that that's who you are, and it paints that picture for you," Cano says. "But it's usually secret, so [cutters] are just proving it to themselves. They are acting out the negative statements they hear in their heads, and we know that Satan is the father of lies."

Although personality traits may be a key to identifying risk, Mintle says family dynamics are just as important because the underlying issues are often about isolation, abandonment or perceived neglect. "I always treat the family," Mintle says, explaining that kids typically learn to manage their emotions at home. "I'm not blaming the family. I'm saying you have to know your child and understand their temperament and their way of coping with life. And guess what? It might not be like [yours]."

Lauren says when she started cutting, she was spiraling downward into a depression at the same time that her mother was going through a similar experience. "Things at home got rough," she says. "Mom's having treatment, Dad's worrying about Mom, I'm feeling ignored." Looking back, Lauren says she now realizes the neglect she felt was mostly in her mind.

"Don't assume they're [always] coming from unloving or dysfunctional homes," Mintle warns. She says there could be many reasons parents may appear to be preoccupied, including illness, financial or marital strain, or as in Lauren's case, caring for another needy family member.

Self-cutting is sometimes compared with anorexia or bulimia because it results from similar control and perfectionism issues. "Kids learn in some families that it's more beneficial

to be perfectionistic than admitting their faults because people don't really know how to help you with that," Mintle says.

Bible teacher and author Joyce Meyer says perfectionist personalities are irritated by self-esteem issues. "As a parent, it's important to know your child's abilities, and don't get frustrated when they don't do something exactly the way you wanted," she says.

"As a child, it's important to know that God does not expect you to be perfect, and even when you mess up He still loves you. Constant love, support and motivation are a few areas parents can work on to prevent perfectionism."

Meyer's book *Approval Addiction* deals with emotions such as shame and rejection, along with godly self-acceptance in light of Jesus' righteousness.

Help for the Hurting

It was Lauren's mother who first noticed her cuts. Embarrassed, Lauren said they were scratches from her cats, but a few weeks later, her mom noticed more scars and confronted her again.

"Part of me wanted to believe they should mind their own business," Lauren says, noting that her parents started watching her closely. "I couldn't be alone in my room more than five minutes without someone checking on me. It felt like I was being spied on."

Drastic situations require drastic measures, but parents must address cutters with care. Psychologists say it is unwise to overreact or heap more guilt and shame upon a child who's already sinking in emotional quicksand. And while breaking the secrecy of an addiction disrupts its power, parents must realize that a cutter will feel violated when she's been discovered.

"You're taking something valuable from them," Cano says. "You first have to tap into them as a human being. There are scars and wounds, and [she's] hurting."

It's not unusual for teens to distance themselves from their parents during the adolescent years. That's why it is important for families to bring in a third-party counselor, pastor or mentor, who not only serves as a confidante for the teen but also can help with communication skills and offset family dynamics. "It won't hurt a parent to do some examination about, How am I coming across to my teen?"

Hadow says. "Am I on the cell phone constantly? Do I look available to this child?"

Experts say a Christian therapist can also teach a cutter how God can empower her to deal with the addiction because, though it may seem overly simplistic, cutting is a temptation. Lauren reluctantly went to a therapist, who began by winning her trust and then taught her how to battle the urge to cut herself. She says if she has come away with one gold nugget of advice, it's that cutting is a spur-of-the-moment activity.

"She told me whenever I feel [the urge to cut], pretend you're in a movie and you can hit the fast forward button," Lauren

says. Her therapist taught her how to predict the outcome of her choices and decide whether to give in to self-destruction or overcome it.

Modeling positive ways of dealing with emotions will help kids accept their strengths and weaknesses and ultimately foster healthier relationships with family, friends and, most important, with God.

Lauren, who is in college now, says she never felt like part of her high school youth group. "When you're little, church is the happy place to go," she says. "As you get older, it's always happy time. Even the messages that the youth pastors preached, they never deal with teen issues. ... If you're sad, we have to find a way to fix it."

Because depression has a way of magnifying feelings of rejection, kids who feel like misfits are more likely to cast off the church and even their faith. "Right now I'm actually no longer a Christian," Lauren says.

"The sad thing about the church is that either we focus on how vile we are or we put on our masks and act like we have everything together," Haddow says. "We've got to continually work on being real."

Experts agree that finding fulfillment in a daily, personal relationship with Jesus and His people is the foundation of a meaningful Christian life. It's not a quick fix, but they say a heart that learns to love and trust through all the joys and sorrows of life is the heart that truly knows it's alive.

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Parents Can Make a Difference

Recognizing the potential for self-injury is the first step in rescuing a loved one from a lifetime of turmoil and addiction. Kids typically clarify their self-concept, faith and worldview during the critical teen and college years, but it's never too early to take proactive, preventive measures toward your children's emotional and spiritual health. Here are some practical ways to raise healthy kids:

1. Teach truth. Teach your child how to treasure her body (see 1 Cor. 6:19) and renew her mind (see John 8:31). The Bible says, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6, NKJV). Empowering youth with the truth of God's Word is paramount, especially in a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christianity.

"If there's no truth, and your experience is all that matters, and you're feeling a little disconnected ... and you don't have the coping mechanisms, then one thing you might try is self-mutilation," says Christian psychologist Linda Mintle, Ph.D. Teen Mania counselor José Cano has compiled a list of "Who Am I in Christ" Scriptures ([visit](#)) to build up a teen's understanding of how God sees those who put their trust in Him.

2. Connect. Teens and young adults who feel alienated are more

likely to fall victim to introspection and depression. Getting into your children's world on their level from an early age, whether you're playing with dolls or playing sports or computer games, will lay a foundation of trust and love that lasts through their teen years.

Psychologists and youth ministers urge parents also to develop a strong network of outside role models for their kids. "The parent can lead the child in a way that they know there are others they can access for godly instruction or confession," Cano says. It could be a teacher, a coach or a neighbor.

"I can't overestimate the need for mentors," Christian counselor Laurie Haddow says, "because when you hit that age ... the teen just doesn't want to talk with the parents. Do some reconnaissance work and call someone whom you know to connect with her. Stop at nothing."

3. Validate feelings. Overcoming spiritual battles often begins with an honest assessment of one's true feelings and motives. Help youth bring their emotions to the surface through discussion, creative games, journaling, drawing, painting or spontaneous role-playing. Then talk about why it is OK to have all kinds of feelings-even disturbing ones-and how to deal with them responsibly.

Take advantage of the Christian-living resources available that teach how to recognize, accept and then submit emotions to the Holy Spirit for His purpose in developing character. (See related article on page 48.)

4. Break the silence. As much as some parents would like to shelter their kids, experts urge them to talk openly about the

dangers of risky behaviors such as drugs and alcohol abuse and self-cutting. Be careful to keep the discussion age-appropriate.

“We want to keep these issues under a blanket in hopes our children will not get exposed to them,” Cano says. “Unfortunately ... these issues will eventually knock at your door to be looked at. The key is ... bring [them] to the surface before they get embedded down below the troubled soul.”

A Deeper Look

These resources and Web sites can provide more information on self-injury, addictions and other related topics:

Joyce Meyer ()

Battlefield of the Mind (Warner Faith)

Approval Addiction (Warner Faith)

Linda Mintle, Ph.D. ()

Breaking Free book series (Charisma House)

Ron Luce, Teen Mania (or)

Battle Cry for a Generation (Cook Communications)

Got Questions Ministries ()

Focus on the Family ()

Dare 2 Dig Deeper series: Hurting Beyond Words (Focus on the Family)