

'Why Is My Daughter Cutting Herself?'

When I worked with teenagers, I would spend a month staffing a summer camp. In the midst of the fun, we would give opportunities for the kids to share what was going on in their lives.

A lot of things would come to the surface during those times. I was in charge of all of the leaders. When they had an issue, particularly with a kid, they came to me.

There seemed to be a reoccurring theme week after week, summer after summer. These sweet little teens and preteens were cutting themselves. It happens with boys, sometimes, and the causes are similar, but it is mainly an issue with girls.

It was difficult for anyone to understand. Most of the time when we would tell the parents, they would be shocked and would want to know why. If you ever have or will ask the question, "Why is my daughter cutting herself?" here are some answers.

Warning Signs

Look for the signs. The arms are a common place for cutting to occur. If they always wear long sleeves, they might be trying to hide the scars. Legs also tend to be common targets. Look for cuts, scratches, burns or bruises that are new, particularly if it is consistent, when it seems (all of the sudden) they have become a clumsy person or accident prone. Other signs may include spending a lot of time alone or never feeling good about themselves. When she speaks about herself, is it usually negative?

Coping Mechanism

People who inflict self-injury have uncomfortable feelings that they do not know how to deal with or adequately express. They may have experienced something traumatic, particularly in childhood. It can also be linked to confusion about their identity or sexuality.

Other times, it is connected to difficulty in making friends and maintaining personal relationships. Relational and identity problems are typical experiences in early adolescence. When adolescents don't know how to manage their emotions or express themselves, cutting gives them a relief. It will even produce a chemical release in the brain. Obviously, this is an unhealthy coping mechanism. They are in need of treatment to learn healthy ways to manage and express their feelings.

Distraction and the Feeling of Control

When people cut or hurt themselves, they are attempting to distract themselves from the intense pain and feelings. She is suffering and looking for relief. It is a way for her to get her mind off of it. The cutting also gives her a feeling of control. Life and relationships feel chaotic and unstable. She is looking for an anchor—like Jesus—in which to ground herself. Many self-injurers also suffer with an eating disorder for the same reason. It is something that they can control that offers a distraction.

Suicide

Self-injury is an elevated cry for help; however, most self-injurers are not suicidal. Since it is a coping mechanism, it is actually an activity that, in a weird way, attempts to sustain their life, rather than end it. Suicides by self-injurers tend to be accidental. They may have suicidal thoughts, and it should be discussed in therapy, even though self-injury is usually completely different and needs different treatment.

For more valuable information on self-injury and treatment options, check out the book, *Bodily Harm* by Karen Conterio and Wendy Lader, PhD.

Sound Off: Have you had a child or loved one cause self-injury?

Huddle up with your kids and ask, "How do you deal with things when you are hurt emotionally?"

Related Resource: "8 Warning Signs Your Child is Headed for Trouble"

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