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**MIND** Granta House, 15/19 Broadway, Stratford, London E15 4BQ  
Info Line: 0845 766 0163 (Mon-Fri 9.15am-5.15pm) For deaf or  
speech impaired enquirers - Mind Info Line textphone: 0845 330 1585  
(if using BT text direct add the prefix 18001)  
*Information on mental health problems, services, rights; local MIND  
group details*

**National Drug Helpline** 0800 776600  
*Confidential 24 hour service. Advice, information, support and  
referrals where appropriate*

**National Self-Harm Network** PO Box 7264, Nottingham NG1  
6WJ  
*Survivor organisation campaigning for the rights of people who  
self-harm*

**NSPCC** 0808 8005000 (including Asian helpline) Text phone for  
deaf and hard of hearing: 0800 0560566  
*Free 24 hour helpline for abused children and their families*

**SAFE** Helpline: 01722 410 889  
*Support for ritual abuse survivors*

**Self Harm Alliance** PO Box 61, Cheltenham GL51 8YB  
Helpline: 01242 578 820 (Wed-Sun 7-8pm)  
*Newsletter, advocacy, support*

**Women's Aid** PO Box 391, Bristol BS99 7WS  
National helpline: 08457 023 468 (Mon-Fri 9am-9pm, Sat  
10am-5pm)  
*Advice, help and information for women suffering domestic violence*

**Women's Therapy Centre** 10 Manor Gardens, London N7 6JS  
0207 263 6200 *Psychoanalytic psychotherapy (individuals and  
groups), advice, information and referrals*

**Youth Access** 1A Taylors Yd, 67 Alderbrook Road, London  
SW12 8AD 0208 772 9900  
*National referral service for young people (usually up to 25) to local  
advice and counselling services*

## Useful contacts

**The Basement Project** PO Box 5, Abergavenny NP7 5XW  
01873 856524 *Workshops, publications, newsletter*

**Bristol Crisis Service for Women** PO Box 654, Bristol BS99 1XH  
Office/admin: 0117 927 9600 Helpline: 0117 925 1119 (Fri&Sat  
9pm -12.30am, Sun 6-9pm) website: [www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw](http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/bcsw)  
*For women in emotional distress; focus on self-injury. Research,  
information, publications and training about self-injury*

**British Association for Counselling** 1 Regent Place, Rugby,  
Warwicks CV21 2PJ 01788 550 899  
*Send sae for list of local counsellors*

**Careline** 0208 514 1177 (Mon-Fri 10am-4pm & 7-10pm)  
*Telephone counselling and referral for any problem, for children and  
adults*

**Childline** 0800 1111 Childline Freepost, 1111 London N1 0BR  
*24-hour helpline for children and teenagers*

**Drinkline** 0800 917 8282 (Mon-Fri 9am-11pm, Sat&Sun 6-11pm)  
*Advice and information on drink problems, sources of help, support  
for family and friends*

**Drugscope** Waterbridge House, 32-36 Loman Street,  
London SE1 0EE 0207 928 1211  
*Information on local services for people with drug problems (including  
prescribed drugs)*

**Eating Disorders Association** 1st Floor Wensum House,  
103 Prince of Wales Road, Norwich NR1 1DW  
Helpline: 0845 634 1414 (Mon-Fri 8.30am-8.30pm)  
Youth line: 0845 634 7650 (Mon-Fri 4pm-6.30pm)  
Website: [www.eda.uk.com](http://www.eda.uk.com)  
*Information and support on eating problems, details of local groups*

## Introduction

This booklet provides an introduction for anyone who would like to understand more about self-injury. It has been written to be of interest to women who self-injure, their friends and supporters, professionals and anyone else who comes into contact with people who struggle with self-injury.

The booklet looks at the range of self-injury and the reasons women hurt themselves. It identifies some of the experiences which may underlie self-injury, both in childhood and adult life. It then explores how self-injury may have helped someone to cope with those experiences.

Some myths and misunderstandings about self-injury are also examined. Self-injury seems to be a particular problem for women, and some possible explanations for this are put forward. There is a section looking at what may be helpful to a woman wanting to tackle the problem of self-injury, and a list of useful organisations. There are also suggestions for further reading.

Although the emphasis in this booklet is on women's experience, a lot of what is written will also be of relevance to men who injure themselves.

This is the first in a series of four booklets about self-injury. Booklet 2 is a self-help guide for women struggling with self-injury, while Booklet 3 is addressed to friends, family members and partners of someone who injures herself. Booklet 4 is about support groups for people who self-injure.

## What is self-injury?

*"I would smash bottles and cut my arms and legs with the glass."*

*"Sometimes I hold a cigarette or a match flame against my arm. When I haven't wanted to leave scars I've done things like smash my arms against the banisters again and again until they were all bruised."*

*"I would rub and rub at my bare skin with my knuckles until the skin began to slough off."*

The term 'self-injury' refers to acts which involve inflicting injuries on one's own body. Self-injury is also sometimes called 'self-harm' (a broader term), 'cutting-up', 'self-abuse' or 'self-mutilation'.

Self-injury is far more widespread than is realised, and can take many forms. The most common is probably cutting, often of the arms, as well as many other areas. Cuts are usually quite superficial, but some women cut themselves more deeply. Some women also scrape, scratch or pick their skin so badly that chronic sores develop, and scars are left.

Sometimes people burn or scald themselves, while others punch themselves or hit parts of their bodies against something, to cause pain and bruising. Less visible injuries might be caused by inserting or swallowing objects. Some people also hurt themselves by pulling out their hair or eyelashes, or by repeatedly biting and tearing the skin on their hands or fingers.

Self-injury often begins in childhood or adolescence. It may be short-lived, but some women continue to hurt themselves (perhaps off and on) for many years.

## Articles

There are many journal articles about self-injury, mostly aimed at professionals. Some of the most useful and accessible include:

Lee, Sarah: 'When Mental Scars Lead to Physical Wounds'. *The Independent*, 3 May 1994.

Potier, M: 'Giving Evidence: Women's Lives in Ashworth Maximum Security Psychiatric Hospital'. *Feminism and Psychology*, 1993, 3(3), 335-347.

Shapiro, S: 'Self-Mutilation and Self-Blame in Incest Victims'. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Jan 1987, XLI (1), 46-54.

Van der Kolk, B; Perry, C; & Herman, J: 'Childhood Origins of self-destructive Behaviour'. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, Dec 1991, 148(12), 1665-1671.

Wise, M: 'Adult Self-Injury as a Survival Response in Victim-Survivors of Childhood Abuse'. *Journal of Chemical Dependency Treatment*, 1989, 3(1), 185-201.

## Further reading

Booklet 2 in this series, '*Self-help for self-injury*' provides extensive suggestions for women who want to understand and take more control over their self-injury. This may also be of help to professionals and friends who want to support a woman who is struggling with self-injury. Booklet 3, '*For friends and family*' explores the experience and feelings of relatives, partners and friends of a woman who self-injures. It also contains many suggestions for ways in which they can help. Booklet 4, '*Self-injury support and self-help groups*' is for anyone interested in setting up or being involved in a self-help group, and examines some of the practical concerns and particular issues that may arise in a group supporting people who self-injure.

### Books

Babiker, G. and Arnold, L. **The Language of Injury**. BPS, 1997

Burstow, Bonnie **Radical Feminist Therapy**. Sage, 1992.  
(Chapter 10, 'Self-mutilation' is of interest and value, despite its off-putting title.)

Favazza, Armando R. **Bodies Under Siege**. Johns Hopkins, 1987  
(paperback edition 1992)

Harrison, Diane **Vicious Circles**. Good Practices in Mental Health, 1996.

Miller, Dusty **Women who hurt themselves**. Basic Books, 1994.

Pembroke, Louise (Ed.) **Self Harm: Perspectives from Personal Experience**. Survivors Speak Out, 1994.

Spandler, Helen **Who's Hurting Who?** 42nd Street, 1996.

Walsh, Barent W. & Rosen, Paul M. **Self-Mutilation: Theory,**

**Research and Treatment**. Guilford Press, 1988.

Self-injury is often mistakenly seen as a suicide attempt. However, women who harm themselves are usually very clear about the difference between self-injury and a suicide attempt. Whatever similarities self-injury may bear to suicidal acts, it is not about dying. Rather it is about trying to cope and carry on with life.

Whilst some people harm themselves in ways which are obvious to others, or seek help for their injuries, others are surprisingly successful at hiding what they do. Shame, fear and humiliation may force women to keep their self-injury secret for many years. This means that the true nature and extent of the problem are unknown. The huge response from women to press attention to self-injury suggests that many more people harm themselves than is currently recognised or recorded.

### Self-injury in context

Many people cope with difficulties or distress in their lives in ways which are harmful to themselves. Some people drink too much, others make themselves ill through overwork, worry, or by ignoring their own needs and feelings. Many people smoke, drive their cars too fast, gamble, or do other socially acceptable things which are nevertheless risky and harmful to themselves. For some, especially women, starving or overeating are forms of 'self-harm' by which they cope with conflicts and painful feelings.

Self-injury may be much more immediately and dramatically destructive than these other forms of self-harm (though not necessarily any more dangerous long-term). However, like these it is carried out to help someone cope with her life. The next section looks at what may bring a woman to cope in this way.

## Why do women self-injure?

*"It's a solution that means I'm not going to completely flip out or kill myself."*

*"I seem to burn myself after the worst part of a bout of depression, almost as if I were cauterising a wound."*

*"Cutting was my only release from the unbearable chaos inside me."*

### A way of coping

Self-injury can seem very hard to understand, but there are always powerful reasons why a woman hurts herself. First and foremost, it is a way of coping. Self-destructive as it may seem, self-injury is a way of helping oneself to go on living, usually in the face of great emotional pain.

The reasons for self-injury are complex and subtle and differ from person to person. Self-injury almost always begins in response to painful and difficult events or circumstances in a person's life. Often these stem from childhood, although some women begin hurting themselves in response to distressing adult experiences. Often there is no single cause to be identified, but a number of factors in a woman's life which make sense of her vulnerability and her need to cope and express herself through self-injury.

To fully understand all the reasons for an individual's self-injury, it is necessary to look into the circumstances which underlie her feelings and behaviour. In the next section we explore the sorts of experiences which may lie behind self-injury. We will then look in more detail at how hurting herself may have helped a woman to cope with these.

advice are likely to be available from the local Citizens' Advice Bureau, money and debt advice agencies, housing charities, Women's Aid or other domestic violence projects, single parent support groups and Social Services.

### Crisis services

*"I needed somewhere I could go to be safe at really bad times. Not a hospital, just somewhere I could be with people who understood."*

Many women say that it helps them enormously to have someone to turn to when they are having a difficult time and are likely to hurt themselves. Helplines can be very useful, as can drop-in facilities at 'mental health' projects. Local MIND groups are a good source of information about these. What many women would also like is to have somewhere to go for 'sanctuary' for short periods, where they could feel safe and cared for without being labelled and treated as 'mentally ill'. There are a few such facilities available around the country, but more are needed.

When women go to Accident and Emergency departments or psychiatric hospitals for help they need and appreciate kindness, support and acceptance from staff who are willing to see and try to understand their distress.

### Advocacy

Sometimes women who use mental health services can find it very valuable to have someone available to represent their views and needs. In some areas MIND, mental health survivors' organisations and other projects provide advocacy services. A friend can also be very valuable as a supporter and advocate when a woman is in crisis.

A group can be very valuable in providing a place for a woman to explore her self-injury with the support of others who understand her experience from the inside. There can be feelings of equality and empathy in a group which are not possible in relationships with professionals. Women who share oppressive experiences can gain strength from their shared anger and determination to bring about change.

There are very few groups available specifically for women who self-injure. Although women may also benefit greatly from other groups, such as those for sexual abuse survivors, many would like a group in which the focus is on self-injury. Women can set up their own groups and provide a lot of support to one another, but some feel they need a facilitator to help run the group, at least at first. Information and help with starting a group may be available from some of the agencies listed under '*Counselling*', above.

### ***Practical changes***

Sometimes a woman needs to make important changes in her practical circumstances. Counselling may be important, but is likely to be of little real benefit if her daily life is blighted by ongoing problems. Often practical help and support are needed too.

The sorts of issues which a woman may need help with might include severe problems with money or housing. She may be trapped in oppressive and exploitative work. Or she may be being beaten or constantly undermined in a relationship. Some women suffer great stress from being overloaded by childcare responsibilities, with no friends or support network.

The role of these sorts of real issues in affecting a woman's mental health is crucial and she may only be able to let go of her self-injury when her circumstances are improved. It is important that professionals trying to help a woman overcome self-injury address both emotional and practical issues in her life. Practical

help and

### **Childhood experiences which may underlie self-injury**

*"I went into Care when I was 6, after my mother died and my father remarried - they had a new family and made it completely obvious they didn't want me. I had loads of foster parents but it never worked out. As far as I'm concerned they just did it for the money. I always felt like rubbish. I never felt loved or wanted. I think I thought if I hurt myself someone would look after me, but then I was usually too scared to show them what I had done."*

Some women who self-injure come from families where there was little communication and their emotional needs were not well met. Others come from more obviously abusive backgrounds.

Experiences which seem to be common amongst women who self-injure include physical and sexual abuse, as well as witnessing family violence, chaos or alcohol problems. Many women report having been seriously neglected as children. Some women were greatly distressed as a result of living with a parent suffering from severe emotional problems. Loss of a parent (through death or separation) also seems common, as does the experience of being taken into Care.

*"My father used to abuse me; - physically and sexually. I used to pray that he would die. When he did die I felt enormous guilt and self-hatred. When I hurt myself I felt like I was 'cutting out the badness'. And I could block off all the chaos that was going on around me and just concentrate on the injury".*

For some people who self-injure, childhood was less dramatically hurtful, but they suffered emotional deprivation or abuse. Some women were constantly ignored, criticised or belittled as children. Some were under enormous pressure to excel.

Social factors such as poverty and bad housing may have caused great stress in a woman's family. Children often take on the feelings of anxiety and powerlessness which their parents experience in such difficult circumstances.

Sometimes people who self-injure have a history of serious illness or major surgery as children. For some women, experiencing racist abuse or prejudice may have been very damaging in childhood. Bullying or ostracism because of disability, poverty or sexuality may also have been very hurtful. Self-injury is often related to the low self-esteem, alienation and self-hatred which these sorts of experiences can set up.

Some women were never allowed to **be** children, having to take on adult responsibilities in caring for others. In some families, important feelings and problems were hidden and not talked about, and the child's needs and distress were driven underground.

*"I was the eldest of five, so very soon had to take on the responsibilities of an adult, taking care of the younger ones. Sometimes no-one spoke to me for weeks; we'd pass on the stairs like strangers. No matter how I tried to please them, it never made any difference. There were never any hugs, or love, just ice-cold looks, no conversations. The anger was there, but it never dared show itself, out of fear. The terrible hurt was there, but we never dared cry. I felt like a robot."*

## **Counselling**

*"I just needed someone to talk to about things. Someone who would accept me, see the person behind the scars, and help me sort out why I did it."*

What many women say they want is the opportunity to understand and resolve the feelings that give rise to their self-injury, through talking on a regular basis to someone who will listen, accept and support them. When women gain access to this sort of counselling or therapeutic help, they are often able to break free of patterns of self-harm in which they have been trapped for years, sometimes in spite of extensive psychiatric treatment.

Some good, appropriate counselling services are available, but these are still patchy and in short supply. Information about services in each area should be available from GP's, Social Services, MIND and other mental health groups, Advice Centres, Volunteer Bureaus, Health Information projects, Women's Centres and organisations for survivors of rape, violence or sexual abuse. A list of national organisations which may be able to refer callers to local resources can be found on pages 28 and 29, below.

## **Support groups**

*"Being in a group with other women who self-harm has been brilliant. For the first time I saw that others do it too; it's a way of coping. It's the one place I can be honest about what I do. I've made supportive friends and we see each other between meetings, ring if we feel like hurting ourselves, and help each other when things are hard."*



## What can help?

Self-injury can seem a very difficult problem to overcome. Many women and their families and supporters despair as it continues over months or years. Yet it is quite possible for a woman to stop hurting herself, once she can deal with her situation and her feelings.

One of the things which women who self-injure say they find most helpful is the understanding, acceptance and support of friends and family. Many also want help to explore the reasons for their self-injury. Women also often say they would like somewhere to go to feel safe and supported when things get difficult.

### ***Addressing what lies behind self-injury***

There are always important reasons for self-injury. Once someone can uncover and resolve the roots of her desperation, she will no longer need this coping strategy.

Self-injury may be expressing important things for a woman. Before she can stop hurting herself, she will need to find other ways of speaking out or taking action. It is unrealistic to expect someone to just give up something which has helped them get through life. Many women self-injure for a time, then later leave this behind as they take more control of their lives.

The overwhelming message that comes from women who self-injure is that they do not want to carry on hurting themselves, but that they need help to address the underlying causes. Many feel that the treatment they are offered is inappropriate and makes them feel worthless and powerless. They do not want to be treated as 'disturbed' or 'naughty', but taken seriously, supported and encouraged to find ways out of their distress.

## Adult experiences which may underlie self-injury

Sometimes self-injury begins as a result of distressing events or circumstances in adulthood. Many of the childhood factors which give rise to self-injury have their counterparts in women's adult lives.

Some women begin hurting themselves when they are in situations where they feel isolated, powerless and unsupported. Adult experiences which underlie self-injury can include physical or sexual assault or exploitation. Experiences such as being mugged, raped and sexually harassed often lead to feelings of guilt, 'dirtiness' and anger which may be turned in on oneself as self-injury.

*"My self-injury started after I had a miscarriage and then was sexually assaulted. No-one seemed to think I had anything to be upset about. A lot of people didn't believe me. I felt such anger, such heartache."*

Sometimes a woman starts injuring herself when she is trapped in an abusive or unhappy relationship. This may involve physical violence or threats, and she may be afraid to leave or to protest. Self-injury may also feel like the only solution available to a woman who is being rejected, hurt or undermined by a partner who refuses to listen to her.

*"I started cutting myself during a series of very destructive relationships. I didn't feel I'd got the right to say 'no' to any man. And I was desperate to be liked and accepted, so I just let myself be treated like dirt. And they despised me for it. Then I hated myself so much I wanted to punish my body. It helped me feel a bit better again."*

Many women who hurt themselves suffer from a poor self-image and feelings of powerlessness. Poverty, unemployment and oppression due to racism or anti-lesbianism may contribute to this. Some women hurt themselves in situations where they are subjected to a high degree of control by others, such as in prison or hospital.

*"When I was in hospital I was placed on constant supervision. I was locked in a small room with a nurse watching me and nothing to do or read. The more I was shut up and powerless, the more I was determined to do something to myself as soon as I got the chance."*

### ***Triggers to self injury***

Some women find that episodes of hurting themselves are triggered by current situations and events which evoke past distress. Often these events are reminiscent of past experiences, such as not being heard, feeling rejected or guilty, or being in a situation which feels unsafe. The unresolved pain of the past is reawakened, along with the old way of coping. Understanding this can help someone make sense of their desire to hurt themselves in response to apparently trivial events.

### **♦ *Self-injury is an addiction or habit which should be stopped:***

It is simplistic and dangerous to regard self-injury as a 'habit' which a person must break. A woman hurts herself because of unresolved distress. It may be the case that this is a coping method which she habitually uses. But to call it an addiction or habit implies that it is her behaviour which is the primary problem, rather than the pain which gives rise to it.

Only when a woman has dealt with this pain, or found other ways to cope with it, will the need to injure herself fall away. If someone is prevented from hurting herself before she is ready to cope without it her self-injury may just 'go underground', or she may adopt a different coping strategy (such as with drugs or food).

### **♦ *People who self-injure enjoy pain/do not feel pain:***

People do not self-injure because they enjoy pain. They may feel they deserve pain, or it may help them to cope with emotional distress which hurts them far more.

Some people do not feel anything at the moment of injuring themselves, but later suffer the pain of their wounds or burns. The idea that people who self-injure do not feel pain sometimes leads medical staff to cruel and punitive practices, such as stitching wounds without local anaesthetic. A likely outcome of this is to make a woman feel so upset, abused and helpless that she injures herself again.

♦ ***Self-injury is 'attention seeking' and should be ignored:***

Everybody needs attention. Some of us command attention easily through our jobs, privilege or talents. For some women self-injury is a desperate attempt to draw attention to what is wrong, and attention should be paid to a woman's distress and its causes.

Many people in fact go to great lengths to hide their injuries. For most women hurting themselves has much more to do with coping with their own distress than with trying to gain the attention of others.

The idea that self-injury is attention-seeking often leads people to adopt crude 'behavioural' (reward and punishment) techniques to try to induce a woman to stop hurting herself. This can mean refusing to treat her or talk to her, or telling her off. The usual effect is to make the person feel even worse about herself and to punish herself further, perhaps hiding her self-injury from others (who may therefore think their approach has 'worked'.)

♦ ***Self-injury is carried out to manipulate others:***

Like many things (including talking, crying, silence.....), self-injury can be used in an attempt to manipulate others. However, by far the most important motivation for self-injury is that it helps a woman to cope with her own overwhelming feelings - it is about herself, not about its effect on others.

An important factor may be communication. Many people who self-injure have not been allowed to express their needs and feelings. They have had no opportunity to learn to communicate directly. Where self-injury is a way of attempting to communicate distress, the message should be heard and responded to, whilst the woman is also encouraged to express herself in words, rather than through wounds.

**How women's experiences can lead to self-injury**

For people who have experienced hurt, abuse, or deprivation as children or adults, self-injury may have fulfilled many important survival functions. Even if the situation is now different, the emotional legacy of these experiences may still drive a woman to seek the same solutions.

How does self-injury help a person to cope with painful experiences they have suffered in childhood or adult life?

***Coping with feelings***

Perhaps the most important way in which self-injury helps someone to cope is by giving them some way, however painful, of dealing with their feelings. Many people who self-injure feel unbearable emotional distress. The pain of unresolved past as well as current experiences haunts and terrifies them. This is often experienced as enormous tension.

*"I feel as if I'm going to explode with tension and I need to cut to release it."*

*"It seems like there's a volcano inside me which I need to let out."*

Many women say that hurting themselves brings great relief from their tension and distress. Often it seems to act as a sort of safety valve, perhaps helping someone to carry on coping with her life and responsibilities.

*"When I want to cut I feel very agitated, like nothing else will calm me down."*

Sometimes injuring herself can feel like the only way in which a woman can release her feelings. Unable to cry or shout, or unheard if she does, she lets out some of her anguish by her violence to herself. Anger especially may be released in this way, since this is particularly socially unacceptable for women to express directly.

Self-injury can also be a way of avoiding feelings. While someone else might 'drown their sorrows', someone who self-injures may hurt themselves to numb or distract them from their distress. As with, say, pinching oneself to distract from a toothache, the pain of a physical injury may take the focus away from overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, or fear.

Some women feel that their anguish would bring them to suicide if they did not release some of it through self-injury. Clearly it can be cruel and dangerous to expect someone to simply stop injuring herself, when it is such an important means of survival. Other ways of coping with her pain must be in place before she can face life without self-injury.

### **Communication**

Self-injury may be a way of trying to communicate. A woman makes her pain visible to herself or others through a wound or a bruise. This may be intended as a signal that something is wrong and she needs help.

Where someone's needs and feelings have been ignored, self-injury may serve as a way of proving (to herself, at least) that she is hurt and in need of caring. A person who has not learned to communicate directly about problems (or who is in a relationship with someone who will not talk) may hurt herself to express her frustration and unhappiness. By hurting herself someone may also be trying to protest about something, in effect saying "look at what you have done to me".

## **Myths about self-injury**

Although self-injury is quite common it is also very hidden. Shame and fear of others' reactions prevent many women from talking about the ways in which they hurt themselves and the feelings which lie behind their actions. When they do tell others they are often faced with shock, disgust, or misunderstanding. Some myths about self-injury include the following:

♦ ***Self-injury is a sign of deep disturbance or madness:***

Self-injury is a sign of distress, not madness. It is a sign of someone trying to cope with her life despite great pain. All sorts of people self-injure, many of them leading 'successful' lives and careers.

♦ ***Self-injury is a 'failed' suicide attempt:***

Self-injury is a way of carrying on with life, not of dying. Injuries are seldom life-threatening. A woman may want to 'kill' her feelings, but not herself. It is important to distinguish self-injury from a suicide attempt, so that its true meanings for an individual can be understood.

♦ ***Someone who injures herself is a danger to others:***

Someone who self-injures is directing her hurt and anger at herself, not at others. Self-injury may be shocking and violent, but it is not a sign that someone is likely to injure other people. Most women who self-injure would be appalled at the idea of hurting anyone else.

### **Women's feelings about their bodies**

Many women hate their bodies. They are surrounded by ideals of beauty to which they can seldom conform. Often they feel as if their bodies were 'public property'; there to be attractive to others, not for themselves. And women's bodies are still seen as dangerous and dirty (think of the taboos around menstruation). Abuse or harassment may add to the sense of alienation and hatred of one's own body.

Women express their confusion and distress about their bodies in various ways. Self-injury, like continuous dieting, starving and over-eating may be a way of trying to control and punish one's body. At the same time it may be a sign of defiance, an assertion of a woman's right to do as she pleases with her own body.

### **Self-esteem and power**

Women have particular difficulties with self-esteem. They are still not respected and valued equally with men, yet are subject to impossible and contradictory expectations as mothers, lovers, workers..... They are not supposed to be proud and 'blow their own trumpets'. Black women, lesbians and women with disabilities are valued still less.

At the same time, women are not expected to be powerful and in control of their own lives. It is not feminine to be 'pushy' or assertive. Self-injury is often a way of achieving a sense of control. It is significant that men commonly self-injure in situations where they are subject to others' control, such as in prison or psychiatric hospital. Women also self-injure more commonly in these situations, but powerlessness is part of all women's lives, and some women signal their frustration and resistance by the marks they make on their own bodies.

### **Managing emotional needs**

*"When I was little I used to do things like shut my fingers in drawers so I could be hurt and my Mum would love me. But after I'd done it I was usually too scared to tell her."*

Some women report that the only time they received any caring as children was when they were hurt or ill, so it is natural that they should have tried to gain attention by injuring themselves.

Women have often grown up feeling unentitled or afraid to ask directly for the support and attention they need. Some continue to live in situations where their emotional needs are not recognised or met. A woman may hope that her injuries will bring her the care she craves. Sadly, others' response to her self-injury is often condemning rather than compassionate.

Someone whose emotional needs are not met is likely to experience ongoing and painful feelings of emptiness and longing. They may feel ashamed and undeserving, or try to deny that they have needs. Some women hurt themselves in order to escape their feelings of neediness. Others can only allow themselves to feel deserving of compassion and care when they have hurt themselves.

*"Before I cut or burn myself I feel this kind of utter desperation. I get very frantic; I don't know what I want or what to do with myself. I feel as if there is an enormous aching void inside me and the only way to stop that pain is by hurting myself on the outside. As soon as I do it the desperation goes. There is a real injury there I can see. I can look after it and feel sorry for myself ."*

can just 'get it right', she will be loved rather than hurt.

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### ***Making sense; feeling in control***

Frightening and painful though it may be, self-injury may have helped a woman to make some sense of her life; to find a way of feeling safer and more in control.

When a child (or adult) is persistently badly treated or undermined by those who are important and powerful in her life, she has to make some sort of sense of her experience. She is likely to have taken in negative 'messages' about herself. Perhaps she has been told she is bad and unlovable, or feels she must be, to be treated this way. Often she blames herself for what is done to her.

### ***Self-blame***

A child may blame herself for the illness or death of a parent, for 'causing' parents to break up, for failing to make them stop drinking or being depressed, and so on. A woman may blame herself when she is rejected or abused.

Although feeling to blame is hurtful and damaging to herself, it can also help a person to feel that there is some sense to events. It may be better than feeling the full helplessness and terror of living in an environment where awful things happen to her. It can feel less painful than seeing the truth about how untrustworthy, abusive or unloving the people she loves and needs are. By saying to herself, "I am the one in the wrong" she can preserve an idea of them as right or good.

Blaming oneself may also serve to give a feeling of at least some control over events. If you have the power to cause bad things to happen, then perhaps you can also prevent them from happening. Believing she is to blame can allow someone to believe that if she

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## **Why women?**

*"Perhaps by doing something to our own body we know we are actually causing something to happen. Perhaps it makes us feel less impotent. Men hit each other, or the wall, or their women, or their children; women and children do it to themselves."*

Both women and men self-injure, but the problem seems to be more widespread among women. There are many possible reasons for this, associated with the different experiences, roles and perceptions applied to men and women in society.

### ***Expectations and roles***

*"To the observer, it might look like negative, destructive behaviour, but in contrast to the meek and mildness of the 'good girl' it feels like a positive response."*

It is not generally seen as 'nice' or 'feminine' for women to express strong feelings such as anger or resentment. These are often hidden and turned in against themselves. Where a man may shout or be violent, a woman may express her anger or punish herself for these 'taboo' feelings by hurting her own body.

Women are often expected to be there to respond to the feelings and needs of others, but not to be needy themselves. From childhood they learn that they should put others first. They may be ashamed and punish themselves for their own feelings of need.

Girls are brought up to take responsibility for the feelings and behaviour of others. They learn that they are responsible for upsetting people and 'making' them feel angry, excited, and so on. It makes sense that they then blame and punish themselves for others'

distress. If they receive violence or abuse, they may again feel it is their fault.

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### **Conclusion**

There may be many other ways in which self-injury helps an individual woman to cope with her life. Each woman's experiences and feelings are unique.

The most important point to be understood is that self-injury is not 'crazy' or inexplicable. It carries sense and purpose. However much distress it may cause her (and others), a person injures herself in order to survive.

Understanding that self-injury has meaning and purpose provides a way forward. Once a woman can understand what underlies her self-injury and how it has functioned for her, she can begin to find other ways of coping. In the long term she can resolve her experiences and feelings so that they no longer trouble her in ways which may drive her to hurt herself.

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### *From self-blame to self-injury*

The price of gaining a sense of safety or control through self-blame is guilt and self-hatred. Self-injury can be a means of 'atonement' and relief from this guilt. Someone who has been hurt may also be very afraid, and by punishing herself she may feel as if she is 'doing as she is told' and so perhaps relieve some of her fear. She may also be hoping to avert other disasters (like making a sacrifice to the 'gods' who can affect her fate). Perhaps she also hopes that if she hurts herself and suffers enough she will make herself good and lovable.

There are other ways in which self-injury can help someone to gain a sense of control. For instance a woman who feels powerless in her life and relationships may self-injure as a way to express her individuality, to protest and to have control over something, even if it is only over the wounds she inflicts on her own body.

### **Surviving abuse**

For women who have suffered sexual or physical abuse, self-injury is likely to serve some very specific functions.

#### *Feeling contaminated*

Abuse often leaves a person feeling shameful, contaminated and loathsome, as though they were at fault, or there were some evil or poison inside them. Some women gain relief by feeling they are cutting out this 'badness', letting it flow away with the blood.

*"I started cutting when I was 8, to get rid of the layers where I had been touched. Washing didn't get rid of the dirt or the touch."*

woman may feel that hurting herself rids her of an abuser's touch. Or perhaps the terrible feeling of being wrong, dirty and guilty may be eased through the 'atonement' of self-injury. She may also feel as if through hurting herself she is showing that her body belongs to her, rather than to someone who has wielded power over her.

*"Sometimes I just want to destroy the parts of my body that he touched and got into. They don't feel like mine anyway - they're all ruined. Other times when I hurt myself it's like I'm saying 'it's my body'- as though I'm defying him and taking it back for myself."*

#### *Memories and flashbacks*

Traumatic events are often re-experienced through intrusive and terrifying thoughts or flashbacks, which some people find they can stop by hurting themselves. For women who have only vague memories of abuse, hurting themselves may serve as an attempt to remember, or as proof of their suffering (like battle scars). It may have been especially important to have such 'proof' in a situation where abuse or other distressing events were denied or hidden. Here self-injury may have helped a person to preserve her sanity and integrity.

*"I'm sad about all my scars but they are also really important. I can look at them and know I'm not mad and I'm not making it all up."*

#### *Feeling real*

If she has coped with pain and terror by numbing or 'cutting off', self-injury may help a woman to feel more real again (like 'pinching oneself awake'). At least if she is hurting she is feeling something.

### ***Changing one's body***

Hatred of her body can lead a woman to want to hurt or change herself. Some women cut their faces, others injure sexual areas of their bodies. There may be many reasons for this.

It is hard for women to feel good about their bodies in a society which sets ever-changing standards of beauty and desirability. At the same time, women receive very mixed messages about their bodies and their sexuality. A girl or woman who is not supported and encouraged to feel good about herself may take out her self-loathing on her body.

*"We never talked about sex or saw each other's bodies in our house, and I always felt sort-of awkward and dirty. When I started to develop I hated it; I was so embarrassed and afraid people would notice. I started hitting myself, trying to stop myself growing those awful bulges, to make them go away."*

A woman may also self-injure to change her resemblance to a parent who has abused her, or to rid herself of her sexuality, which she feels has caused her to be exploited. Others self-injure to try to reject or change their feared lesbianism.

Disability and racism can also bring about self-hatred and lead someone to want to hurt herself. She may do this to literally change her body, or to dissociate herself from the identity she feels ashamed of.



## Understanding self-injury

Written by **Lois Arnold**  
for **Bristol Crisis Service for Women**

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We are indebted to many women for their generosity and courage in contributing their own experiences of self-injury to our work, and so helping us to produce these booklets

## Bristol Crisis Service for Women

Bristol Crisis Service for Women is a voluntary organisation, set up in 1986 to respond to the needs of women in emotional distress. We have a particular focus on self-injury. We provide a national helpline for women in distress, on Friday and Saturday evenings from 9pm to 12.30am and Sundays from 6pm to 9pm on 0117 925 1119. We offer any woman who rings a chance to talk through her feelings in confidence, without fear of being judged or dismissed. Over half of our calls relate to self-injury.

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This booklet was produced as part of a two-year research project into self-injury by women, funded by the Mental Health Foundation. The aim of the project was to increase understanding of self-injury amongst the public and professionals.

The project was set up as a result of the large volume of requests we receive from individual women and from professionals for information and advice about self-injury. It was clear that women who self-injure often feel that the response they receive from health and other 'helping' agencies is inappropriate to their needs, while workers feel inadequately informed and supported in working with people who self-injure.

Our research involved interviewing and obtaining written responses from a large sample of women who self-injure. We also sought the views and experience of professionals working with self-injury in various settings. We carried out a review of literature on the subject, held a national conference on self-injury, produced information and publications, and developed training for professionals.

For further information about our work, training or publications, please send an sae to:

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