



# Identifying and Responding to Self-Harm

A Functional Approach at Camp

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## Goals/Agenda

- Defining non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)
- Challenging myths about self-injury
- Applying a functional approach to understanding self-injury
- Identifying signs of self-injury
- Responding to and discussing self-injury
- Discussion and Questions



## Common Challenges at Camp

- Novel social situations
- New living environment
- Unfamiliar routines
- New relationships with supportive peers and adults
- Environmental emotional vulnerabilities (sleep schedule, diet, etc)
- Change in year-round resources
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- Different behavioral expectations



## Defining non-suicidal self-injury

## What is Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI)?

NSSI is “the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue resulting in immediate damage, *without suicidal intent* and for purposes not culturally sanctioned (ISSS, 2007).”

- Intentional cutting, carving or puncturing of the skin
- Scratching
- Burning
- Self-bruising

Self-injury can be performed on any part of the body but most often occurs on the hands, wrists, stomach, and thighs.

Tattoos and body piercings are not *usually* considered self-injurious unless done with the intention to harm the body.

### Self-injury is sometimes also called:

- deliberate self-harm, or self-harm
- self-injurious behavior
- self-mutilation
- cutting
- non-suicidal self-injury



## Incidence, age of onset, and duration of self-injury

### Prevalence

- In general, US studies tend to find that lifetime prevalence rates of self-injury range from:
  - 12% to 37.2% in secondary school populations (Jacobson & Gould, 2007)
  - 12% to 20% in young adult populations (Whitlock, Eckenrode, & Silverman, 2006)
- Rates of self-injury are difficult to measure because most individuals keep the behavior private

### Age of Onset

- In general, research shows an average age of onset between 11-15 years (Jacobson & Gould, 2007)
- More than 25% report initiating at age 17



## Challenging myths about self-injury

## Myths about Self-Injury

People do it to get attention

It is a failed suicide attempt

Only females self-injure

Self-injury is untreatable

It is used to manipulate others

Only people with Borderline Personality Disorder self-injure





## Is Self-Injury Contagious?

***"The seemingly rapid spread of self-injury among community populations of youth suggests that there may be a social contagion factor at work."***  
Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

- In short, we don't have enough evidence to know for sure.
- There is a lack of empirical data to test the assumption that NSSI is contagious.
- Studies of contagion among adolescents in clinical settings demonstrate the tendency for NSSI to spread in a population.
- Some research suggests that the increasing prevalence of self-injury in popular media, such as movies, books, and news reports, may play a role in the spread of self-injury.

(Whitlock, 2010)



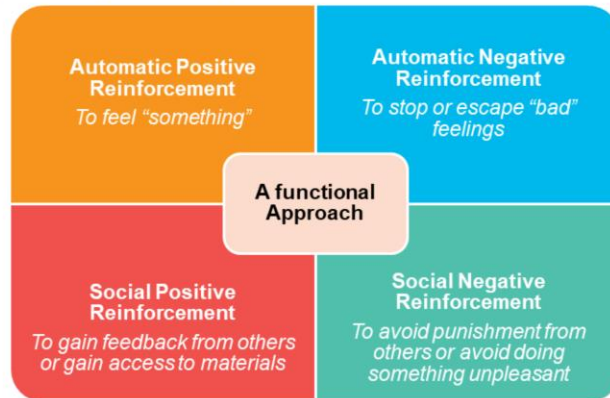
Possibility that social normalization leads to more experimentation with self-injury as a coping mechanism.

Little evidence to support that more individuals rely on self-harm when others around them self-harm—chicken or the egg.

**Applying a functional  
approach to understanding  
self-injury**

## Self-injury as a maladaptive coping mechanism

### Why Do People Self-Injure?



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(Nock & Prinstein, 2004)



- When we are talking about the why of self-injury, we are thinking about it less from an underlying problem (e.g., history of trauma or depression or anxiety)—but rather the processes produce and maintain the behavior
- Reasons for engaging in self-injury are diverse
- Most common reason is emotion regulation –
  - Many individuals who self-injure, report overwhelming sadness, anxiety, or emotional numbness as common emotional triggers.
  - Self-injury, they report, provides a way to manage intolerable feelings, escape the bad feelings OR experience some sense of feeling because they feel “numb”.-- Self injury is best understood as a ***coping mechanism***.
- Other – trying to communicate a need

## Identifying signs of self-injury

## Potential Signs of Self-Injury

- Marks on the arms, fists and forearms opposite the dominant hand are common areas for injury. However, evidence of self-injury can appear anywhere on the body.
- Inappropriate dress for the season
- Frequent use of wrist bands/coverings
- Unwillingness to participate in events or activities which require less body coverage
- Frequent bandages, odd or unexplainable paraphernalia (e.g., razor blades or other instruments which could be used to cut or pound)
- Heightened signs of depression or anxiety

(Whitlock, 2010)



## **Responding to and discussing self-injury**

## Suggestions if you Suspect or Discover Someone is Self-Injuring:

### DO:

- Address the issue as soon as possible
- Make eye contact and speak in a calm tone
- Be specific about your concerns and why you have them
- Remain neutral and validate the person's feelings without agreeing with the behavior
- Ask for permission to ask certain questions

### DO NOT:

- Yell, blame, or criticize the child or adolescent
- Use lectures, ultimatums, or threats
- Engage in power struggles (attempt to control their behavior)
- Demand answers

**Practice**  
**Respectful Curiosity:**  
Questions about marks should be non-threatening and emotionally neutral

- “Why do you think self-injury works for you?”
- “How does self-injury make you feel?”
- “How do you feel before you self-injure?”
- “How do you feel after?”
- “What are some reasons you might want to stop self-injuring?”
- “What are some reasons it would be hard to stop self-injuring?”
- “Is there anything stressing you out right now that I can help you with?”
- “Let’s try to understand this slip. You’ve been successful in not self-injuring before – what do you think was different this time?”
- “What has been successful in the past that has helped you fight the urge to injure?”
- “How do you view yourself when you succeed at not injuring?”
- “Is there anything missing in our relationship, that if it were present, would make a difference?”

## How our reaction can impact self-injury

- Model emotional honesty: State the facts and how you feel.
  - “I noticed some red marks on your arms during swim. I’m feeling worried about where the marks came from. How would you feel if I ask a few questions so I can better understand?”
  - “Your bunkmate mentioned to me that they heard you say something about hurting yourself. I want to do everything I can to help you feel support and understand how you are feeling. Can we take a few minutes to talk?”
- Take the time to observe your own thoughts and feelings when having difficult conversations with the person
- If you notice feelings of anger, frustration, or are noticing judgments about the person, consider taking a break from the conversation and returning once you feel calmer



“I want to do everything I can to help you feel supported and respected. I also want to better understand what you feel, think, and experience. Do you mind if I ask a few questions to help me better understand?” Even if one of more of your questions crosses the comfort zone for your child, they are likely to better trust your intention if you have been clear. Also, you being clear and honest models emotional honesty and clarity for them as well. Similarly, it is really important to honor your child’s responses and disclosures. If they do not want to share something or anything, you will need to accept this with as much grace and humility as possible – even if it frustrates you or hurts your feelings.



## How our reaction can reinforce self-injury

- Choose an appropriate time and place for the conversation
  - How might timing impact social factors? Are you in a space where the person can speak openly? Are you emotionally prepared for the conversation?
- Recognize that direct questions can feel invasive even when that is not your intention.
  - Be mindful of the level of shame and guilt that can be associated with these behaviors
  - If the person is not willing to share something or anything, take a break from the conversation before trying to gather more information



## G.I.V.E. into the Relationship “Bank Account”

- Be **G**entle
  - Reduce judgment, stay neutral
- Act **I**nterested
  - Get more information, stay curious
  - Clarify and summarize without making assumptions
- **V**alidate
  - Thoughts, feelings, and urges (not behaviors)
- **E**asy Manner
  - Relax nonverbal behavior
  - Be mindful of intensity (word choice and tone)





**Remind yourself and others  
that self-injury is a coping  
mechanism used when  
someone is suffering to  
increase compassion in your  
approach to problem-solving.**

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## Questions and Discussion

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