

TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVENTIONS FOR SEXUAL ASSAULT SURVIVORS WHO SELF-INJURE

TRAUMA

Self-injury, also referred to as self-harm, self-mutilation, self-inflicted violence, and non-suicidal self-injury, is the direct and intentional injuring of oneself. Self-injury is often misunderstood, but the purpose of this behavior is a way of coping with and regulating intense emotions, not typically an effort at suicide.

Self-injurious behaviors are common among sexual assault survivors, with the strongest association between self-injury and child sexual abuse (Lang & Sharma-Patel, 2011). Self-injury is used to regulate an overwhelming emotional state while also disrupting the sense of numbness from avoiding such emotions for many survivors (Lang & Sharma-Patel, 2011). Research also indicates that self-injury plays a functional role, serving as a way to cope with trauma-related symptoms (Smith, Kouros, & Meuret, 2013).

No matter the reason for self-injury, helping survivors to overcome this behavior takes patience and sensitivity. Most counselors don't have the ability to spend months with a survivor, but you still have the opportunity to be the first positive person in their journey who supports and empowers them.



Familiarize yourself with the many ways that people self-injure. These behaviors can include cutting, burning, biting, and scratching. Also recognize that most individuals that self-injure use multiple methods.

Never blame a survivor for their behaviors. It is important to not only view the self-injurious behavior through this lens, but also help to make the connection between past trauma and current coping when working from a trauma-informed perspective. Helping to make this connection will give a better understanding of behaviors as well as the knowledge that they have control over them.



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How to respond to a client who shares a self-injurious behavior:

- Respond in a calm & non-judgmental manner
- Thank them for trusting you enough to share
- Help them to decide if the injury needs medical care

Identify the reason for self-injury or the function that it serves. It may be helpful do to some self-reflection, like the worksheets found in *Understanding Self-injury: A workbook for adults* (Trautmann & Connors, 2004), to determine why they are engaging in the behavior. It may also be helpful to identify other areas of their life where they are harming themselves.

These additional harms may come in the form of unhealthy coping like excessive exercising, over spending or harmful relationships.

Self-reflection may be helpful for clients to capture the range of their behaviors on the spectrum of self-nurturing to self-harming in various aspects of their life.

Help to develop a chain of events around the self-injurious behaviors to get a clear picture. When did the self-harm occur? What was happening right before the self-harm? How were they feeling before the self-harm? How were they feeling after the self-harm?

They may begin to connect the thoughts and feelings that triggered the behaviors if they are able to answer some of these questions.

Identify alternative coping behaviors. Because self-injury is a means of coping we cannot simply remove the behavior, but rather replace it with a healthy alternative. The client must first be able to identify the behavior as negative and want to find an alternative.

Replacing self-injurious behaviors can be difficult. Your support and encouragement during this time are invaluable.

Revisit the reason and the function that the self-injurious behavior serves before choosing an alternative coping behavior. You may also want to review the chain of events that was created following a recent self-injury, the thoughts and feelings that served as triggers to the behavior may help in choosing an alternative. The following alternatives may be helpful once an individual is ready to take this step.

Use clear language to label the self-injurious behavior. This shows that you understand and also will encourage open and honest communication so that change can happen.

ALTERNATIVE VISUALS

Offer washable markers to draw the marks or blood before they harm if they identify the need to visually see marks or blood. Red, orange and black are good options. Red and orange are bright and can be used for blood, black to draw over the orange and red in anger.

ALTERNATIVE SENSATION PRODUCERS

Help the individual to feel in more nurturing ways if they self-injure to feel their body. They can use their hands to rub clothing, a piece of jewelry, a stone, or a stuffed animal. If they need something harsher, they can squeeze curlers.

Encourage them to take a bath or shower, focusing on the feeling of the water on their body. This also can be an opportunity to introduce the importance of self-care.

Find a scent that they enjoy like candles, fruit or perfumes. This positive scent may help them to intervene before self-injuring.

Use caution and discuss some safety measures if they choose to use an alternative like ice or a rubber band (i.e. use a cloth between your skin and the ice cube). The goal is not to replace one harming behavior with another, but some individuals may need this option as a first step.

ALTERNATIVE OUTLETS FOR ANGER

Ripping paper can be very powerful. The sound can be soothing and the act can allow them to feel in control. They also may want to write down what makes them angry and then rip up the paper slowly to release the emotion.

Encourage the outlet of the tension or anger they are experiencing. Throw eggs in the shower or ice at the ground. Movement is also a helpful way to channel away feelings, emotions and

urges. Suggest yoga, a walk/run or dancing to music. Movement can be done anywhere and any type of movement can be helpful (an individual once reported that she did jumping jacks in the bathroom stall of a restaurant to resist her urge to self-injure!).



CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES

Art can be very helpful. Ask them to draw what their emotions felt like before, during, and after self-injuring. This may even be helpful for them to do at home and bring to share with you. Ask questions about the art so they can relay their feelings and experience to you, rather than interpreting the art.

Encourage them to sing a song they know by heart or pick a song that easily gets stuck in their head. They also may want to recite their favorite poem or verse.

Encourage the use of writing to express their feelings. Free writing can happen anywhere and anytime that an urge to self-injure occurs. They also can finish with a positive affirmation or a list of things for which they are grateful.

Music can be a helpful alternative, especially when working with young people. Create a list of positive songs they can listen to when they feel the urge to self-injure.

— SELF INJURY —



FOCUSING ALTERNATIVES

Play dough is very helpful when an individual wants to hit or destroy something to avoid self-injuring. Have them create with the clay and then destroy it however they choose.

Encourage relaxation. Practice breathing and being present with non-judgment, feeling their belly rise and fall with each breath, or counting while they breathe in and out.

Role plays can be useful if negative self-talk triggers the urge to self-injure. You can share positive affirmations and have them repeat to introduce positive elements into their self-talk.

Connecting with another person also can be powerful. Many individuals self-injure alone, talking or texting with a friend can decrease their isolation and urge to self-injure.

Remember that an alternative may only need to be for a short period of time. Survivors may have other activities they enjoy that they can engage in while the urge to self-injure passes. Encourage them to select the alternative behavior so they are more likely to follow through.

In the sexual assault field, it is likely that you will work with a survivor who self-injures and this can be a scary thought. Familiarizing yourself with the topic and ways you can help can ease these fears. The best way to help is to listen supportively and without judgment, help them identify the behavior and the reasoning behind it, and find them healthy alternatives. A referral to a trauma therapist should be considered because self-injurious behaviors are strongly connected to a history of trauma. Also remember to care for yourself, supporting individuals who self-injure can be difficult, but rewarding work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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