

What actually is considered self-injury?

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By Katy

Many people question whether certain behaviour is considered self-harm. Self injury (SI) (also called Self-harm, self-inflicted violence, self-injurious behavior, self-mutilation) is a very broad term that can encompass a very wide variety of behaviours, and therefore it is unsurprising that many of us get confused when trying to ascertain exactly what self-injury actually is. Many of us question whether something we are doing constitutes self-injury, or whether it is something else entirely. Being able to attach a label to the behavior we are exhibiting can help us to utilize resources when searching for information, understanding, support or treatment.

What is the definition of SI?

“Self-injury is any deliberate, non suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical harm on your body and is aimed at relieving emotional distress” (First Signs, 2009). Therefore, to be considered self-harming, a behavior must be deliberate, with the intent of causing harm, pain or discomfort, in order to cope with the way you are feeling. Obviously this can take many forms.

I don't take care of myself. Is this a form of SI?

There are various schools of thought on this, but it is important to remember that most people engage in some form of self-damaging behavior, such as smoking, drinking, taking no exercise etc. but what determines whether it is self-injurious is the intent behind the behavior. These behaviors may be harmful to the person, but if the intent is not to inflict harm, injury or pain then it could be argued that this is not SI. However, poor self-care is undeniably linked to low self-esteem, depression and anxiety – and therefore for survivors, over time, lack of self care can undoubtedly be a serious risk to health.

Is having a tattoo or a piercing done a form of self injury?

It has been argued that these types of actions are a form of socially sanctioned self-harm (Stephanie Dallam, 2005) and as the intent is generally for the expression of cultural identity or perceived beauty enhancement, that it is not pathological in nature. However,

even if these practices are socially acceptable, if the intention behind getting a tattoo / piercing is because it means the infliction of pain or distress on yourself, then this could be considered SI.

What about eating disorders and self-injury?

There is a significant correlation between eating disorders and SI. Infact, Favazza (1989) concluded that as many as 50% of people who have an eating disorder also engage in other forms of SI. Although eating disorders are generally classified as separate and distinct from SI, there are clearly parallels between them which, at times, can make the boundaries very hazy. Both are often used as a way of controlling emotions and have a direct, potentially harmful effect upon the person.

Is SI like “failed suicide”?

Many non self-injurers believe that self-harm is akin to a “botched suicide”. However, the majority of mental health professionals agree that self-harm and suicidal behavior is very different. This can be explained in as much as suicide attempts to end all feeling, whereas self-injuring attempts to make a person feel better (Favazza, 1998). Of course, that’s not to say that the self-harmer may not feel suicidal, but rather that self-harming alone is not considered suicidal behavior.

Is all self-harm done consciously?

No. Stereotypical self-harm is that type of self harm with is repetitive in nature, and which is often done without the conscious intention to inflict pain or injury. This is usually more common in people with severe learning difficulties – and is often linked with a severe lack of sensory stimulation or feelings of frustration, rather than seen in survivors as a group.

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