Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Adolescents

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Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a growing concern not only to clinicians, but parents as well. As this issue becomes more well-known, misinformation about NSSI is repeatedly being reported by the media, which can lead to wrong conclusions and harmful judgments. Many parents are not sure what NSSI is and can often respond in unhelpful ways due to fear, disgust, anger, worry, and confusion. Here is a list of common questions that parents have about NSSI.

**What is NSSI?** NSSI is “the direct, deliberate destruction of one’s own body tissue in the absence of suicidal intent” (Nock & Favazza, 2009, p. 9).

**What percentage of adolescents engage in NSSI?** “Current prevalence estimates of NSSI among middle school and high school students range from 15% to 20%, and some studies reporting rates of up to 39%” (Toste & Heath, 2010, p. 14).

**At what age does NSSI begin?** Most NSSI behavior begins as early as the age of 13 for both boys and girls (Hollander, 2008).

**Is NSSI and suicide the same thing?** Suicide and NSSI are distinct from each other. Suicidal intent is different from NSSI because the former is used as a way to end pain, involves critical and life-threatening injuries, and utilizes lethal means. NSSI does not end pain, it helps regulate emotions.

**Why do adolescents engage in NSSI?** Adolescents engage in NSSI as a way to cope with overwhelming emotions. There are frequent misconceptions about individuals injuring themselves because they are doing it for attention or manipulative reasons. However, Hollander (2008) states that less than 4% actually partake in NSSI for those reasons. For individuals who do use self-injury for interpersonal reasons, it is important to look at it as a way of communication. Developmentally, adolescents may not have the ability to communicate their needs, lacking the words to express the emotional pain they are experiencing (Favazza, 1996). Self-injury is a way to convey those needs. Sometimes, this is the only way they can communicate the help they need.

**What can I do as a parent when I find out that my child is engaging in NSSI?** It is important that parents listen to their child and understand that this is a behavior that has worked for them to cope with overwhelming feelings. It is crucial that parents don’t shame or threaten their child. One of the best things that parents can do is to make an appointment with a knowledgeable therapist who can help their child develop healthy coping skills that can be used when they are feeling overwhelmed. This can be a slow process, so it’s important to not give up hope. “Helping Teens who Cut: Understanding and Ending Self-Injury” by M. Hollander is a good resource for parents interested in learning more about NSSI.
To learn more about how Natalis Counseling & Psychology Solutions can help you or your child, contact Bobbi Gerling at rgerling@natalispsychology.com.


