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Community Care Team News

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In This Issue

This issue examines **self-injury** in adolescents and is based on information from the Kane County Health Department's June 2006 Newsletter.

What is Self-Injury?

Self-injury, also known as self-mutilation, is defined as any intentional injury to one's own body. It usually leaves marks or causes tissue damage. It is hard for most people to understand why someone would want to cut or burn him/herself. The mere idea of intentionally inflicting wounds to oneself makes people cringe. Yet there are growing numbers of young people who intentionally hurt themselves. Understanding the phenomenon is the first step in changing it.

Who Engages in Self-Injury?

There is no simple portrait of a person that intentionally injures him/herself. This behavior is not limited by gender, race, education, age, sexual orientation, socio-economics or religion. However, some commonly seen factors include:

- A history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.
- Co-existing problems of substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or eating disorders.
- Raised in families that discouraged expression of anger.
- Lack of skills to express emotions.
- Lack of a good social support network.

What are the Types of Self-Injury?

The most common ways that people self-injure include:

- cutting
- burning
- picking at wounds
- hair pulling
- hitting
- bone-breaking
- head-banging
- multiple piercing
- multiple tattooing

Most self-injuring adolescents act alone, not in groups, and hide their behavior.

How Does Self Injury Become Addictive?

A person who becomes a habitual self-injurer usually follows a progression. The first incident may occur by accident, or after seeing or hearing of others who engage in self-injury. The person has strong feelings such as anger, fear, anxiety or dread before an injuring event. These feelings build, and the person has no way to express or address them directly. Cutting or other self-injury provides a sense of relief, a release of the mounting tension. A feeling of guilt or shame usually follows the event. The person hides the tools used to injure, and covers up the evidence, often by wearing long sleeves. The next time a similar strong feeling arises, the person has been “conditioned” to seek relief in the same way. The person feels compelled to repeat self-harm, which is likely to increase in frequency and degree.

Self injury is not suicidal behavior. In fact, it may be a way to reduce the tension that, left unattended, could result in an actual suicide attempt. Self-injury is the best way an individual knows to self-soothe. It may represent the best attempt the person has at creating the least damage. However, self-injury is highly linked to poor sense of self-worth, and over time, that

depressed feeling can evolve into suicidal attempts.

How Can I Help?

It's very hard to discover that someone you care about is physically harming him/herself. Your concern may come out in frustration and even comments that can drive the person farther away. Some things that might be helpful:

- Understand that self-harming behavior is an attempt to maintain a certain amount of control, and that it is a way of self-soothing.
- Let him/her know that you care and that you will listen.
- Encourage expression of emotions, including anger.
- Spending time doing enjoyable activities together.
- Offer to find a therapist or support group.
- Do not tell the person to stop the behavior or make judgmental comments—people who feel worthless and powerless are even more likely to self-injure.

The SAFE Alternatives Program, a treatment program for self-injury has recently relocated to Provena Mercy in Aurora. For more information about their services or the November 11 Open House and tour, call 630.801.5863.