

## ***Confused By Cutting***

By Kelly Seim, LCSW

More and more, teenage clients are brought to see me when a parent discovers that they are cutting, or doing some other form of self-injuring behavior (burning, scratching, picking, etc.). This is a perplexing behavior to most adults who were not exposed to this kind of behavior during their own teenage years. However, this is a growing trend among both adolescent and pre-adolescent males and females. The average onset for cutting is age 12, and one study found that just under 10% of undergraduate students in the U.S. reported that they had self-injured (Wikipedia).

### ***Why Is My Teen Cutting?***

There are various reasons that a teenager begins to self-injure. Due to the prevalence of cutting we can assume that there are cultural forces at work that encourage and support this kind of behavior, there are more pressures on our teens today than ever, and teens are frequently more disconnected from their families and have less access to helpful resources than before (Pipher).

Teens state that cutting helps them to focus on physical pain instead of emotional pain. Emotions that trigger cutting are often described as pain, anger, sadness, emptiness, numbness, and longing. Teens may also cut to stop feeling numb, to punish themselves, or to ask for help when other methods have failed to attract a parent's attention or concern.

Cutting may indicate other mental health issues, as well, including depression, anxiety, low self esteem, eating disorders, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, some personality disorders, or the presence of some kind of trauma (abuse, sexual molestation, etc.).

Cutting or other forms of self-injury can start after a peer introduces them to the behavior. Teens have explained that they saw scars or wounds on their friends' arms at school and realized that it might help them to "release" or cope with negative emotions and thoughts.

It often helps parents to realize that cutting is not an attempt at suicide, although once cutting is discovered, it is important to have a thorough evaluation and treatment to ensure that the self-injurious behavior does not escalate into suicidality.

### ***How Do I Know If My Teen Is Cutting?***

While some teens are open among peers about their cutting, many feel guilty and frightened by the behavior and make attempts to hide their cuts. They often cut in places that no one will see (the upper thigh, breasts, or lower abdomen), or wear long sleeved shirts or pants to conceal the cuts on their arms and legs.

If you notice your teen has unusual or repetitive scars or scratches with unlikely explanations for the wounds, or often wears concealing clothing even in warm weather, it may indicate cutting is occurring.

Initiating a conversation about cutting may help the teen to open up with you about friends or their own experiences with cutting. If you find out that your child has cut, your best response is to stay calm and open, ask questions, and listen more than

speaking. Use the conversation to *learn*, not *teach*. Then seek help from a mental health professional.

### ***How Can Center for Christian Therapy Help?***

While cutting may seem like a strange behavior to you, it has been recognized and studied for decades in the mental health field, and therapists are prepared to face it and help your teen stop.

At CCT, we recognize the intense pressure that our teens face in the world, and that some of these cultural forces even encourage self-injuring behaviors. We believe that all of our teenage clients are a gift from God, and we seek to provide a relationship that teaches them their incredible value. It is through this relationship that teens are provided with the support, hope, and wisdom that can counteract the harmful forces in the teenager's environment.

We also work closely with parents when possible to provide you with resources, ideas, and support as you struggle to understand why this is occurring and how you can best help your teen overcome cutting.

Cutting can become a habit or an addiction in which teens feel unable to stop without some kind of intervention. Teens often lack the tools necessary to help them cope with or manage stress and painful emotions. By talking with a caring therapist, teens can learn to recognize and tolerate their emotions, be accountable for their self-injury, and learn new and healthier ways to cope with and alleviate stress.