

## **Cutting – How to Help a Self-Injurer**

Cutting is a practice that is becoming increasingly common within High school and Junior high school aged youth. Although cutting has been around for many years (labeled as self-mutilation in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>), it has recently gained popularity among America's youth. In fact, a recent article in the New York Times states that, in America, "about two million people, mostly women, cut and burn themselves compulsively in pursuit of an illusory sense of control."<sup>2</sup> This startling statistic reveals just how common cutting truly is.

Unfortunately, many of the people who practice cutting are youth who attend church. Moreover, many parents, grandparents, or guardians of cutters might not even know their children are practicing cutting, primarily because the scars from cutting are hidden. Upon a cursory glance, a cutter might appear fine, but a closer look may reveal their scars resulting from this practice. This resource is designed to equip youth ministers, pastors, parents, and friends of cutters in how to respond to this devastating and destructive problem. Specifically, this resource will define cutting, examine who practices cutting, attempt to provide the reader with an understanding of cutting, and present a Biblical way that cutting may be overcome.

### **Defining Cutting**

Cutting is a facet of self-injury in which a person uses a knife, razor, or other sharp object to inflict a wound on their body. Despite the graphic description just given, the wounds that cutters inflict upon themselves are usually considered non-life-threatening. Although cutting is usually performed on the person's arms or legs, other parts of the body may be cut.

### **Who Cuts?**

Although both young men and young women may practice cutting, it is more frequent among young women. One explanation offered is that women are socialized to express their frustration differently than men<sup>3</sup> (i.e., they are taught by society to respond to emotional or physical sorrow and angst differently than men). For instance, men may respond to emotional turmoil by punching a wall or throwing an object (an aggressive, outward response), whereas women may internalize the emotional turmoil and respond by cutting themselves (an aggressive, yet *internal* response). Nevertheless, cutting is popular among men and women.

### **Understanding Cutting**

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<sup>1</sup> Woldorf, G. M. (2005). Clinical implications of the paradox of deliberate self-injury. *Collaborative Practice*, 10, p. 196 – 200.

<sup>2</sup> Egan (1999). Power Suffering. The New York Times.

<sup>3</sup> Battlecry.com. (2007). [www.battlecry.com/pages/understanding\\_cutting.php](http://www.battlecry.com/pages/understanding_cutting.php)

Inevitably the question will be asked: Why would people willingly desire to hurt themselves? There are several answers to that question. First, people would intentionally hurt themselves by cutting because it gives them temporary relief from their problem. If they are overwhelmed by the situation or the emotions they are experiencing, cutting is their “quick fix.” It is much like throwing an object or punching a wall – it has an alleged cathartic effect.<sup>4</sup> Second, people would intentionally cut themselves because it gives them a sense of control.<sup>5</sup> Much like anorexia or bulimia, cutting gives the person practicing it an illusory sense of control over their body. The cutter’s mindset might be expressed the following way, “My body is all I have in a world of chaos, and I’m going to control it!” Third, it is suggested that cutting may provide a release of endorphins in the brain, giving the cutter a temporary “high.”<sup>6</sup> This may account for part of the reason that cutting is so addictive.

### **A Biblical Guide for Overcoming Cutting**

What a cutter needs to do in order to overcome this destructive behavior is to replace the previously destructive, non-Christian habits with new, productive Christian habits. First and foremost, however, a youth minister, pastor, parent or guardian must ask the cutter the primary, unequivocal question: Is the person involved with this practice a Christian? If they are not, take time to talk with them about salvation. Start from the basics: develop the idea of humanity’s depravity and sinfulness (Romans 3:23); talk with them about the consequences of sin (Romans 6:23); explain the provision that God made for their sins by giving a savior (Romans 5:8); and finally, talk about how to be saved (Romans 10:9; Romans 10:13). This is central to their immediate health as well as their eternal health. Remember, as youth ministers, pastors, and parents and guardians, our job is not simply to provide youth with physical health, but also with spiritual health.<sup>7</sup>

Pastors, youth ministers, parents, or guardians need to remind the cutter (lovingly) that the Bible teaches that we should not be controlled by our desires, inclinations, and cravings (i.e., the desire or inclination to cut); rather, the Bible teaches that we should be in control over our bodies – *and* the body’s desires, inclinations, and cravings. In Biblical terminology, cutters need to “put off, concerning [their] former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of [their] mind, and that [they] put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22 – 24). In other words, cutters need to take off their old habits (like they would an old, dirty garment), and put on new habits (like they would a new clean shirt). To be controlled by our desires, inclinations, and cravings is to be in bondage – and God has made us free in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is not true, by the way. Even secular psychologists attest to the fact that catharsis, i.e., relieving aggression by engaging in an aggressive behavior, does not actually relieve aggression; rather, it promotes *more* aggression. c.f. Aronson, E., Wilson, T. D., & Akert, R. M. (2007). *Social psychology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

<sup>5</sup> Egan (1999). Power suffering. *The New York Times*.

<sup>6</sup> Turner, V. J. (2002). *Secret scars: Uncovering and understanding the addiction of self-injury*. Center City, Mn: Hazelden.

<sup>7</sup> “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” (Mark 8:36).

<sup>8</sup> But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. (Rom. 6:22).

## “Putting off and Putting on”

But how does one put off their old habits, and put on new habits? First, remind the youth that once they are saved, they have been regenerated (a theological word that means we have been born again by the spirit of God).<sup>9</sup> Second, encourage them to get to know God’s word, and become acquainted with Jesus Christ. Encourage the youth to get on a Bible reading program, and help them develop a prayer life. Encourage them also to get an accountability partner, someone that they can be honest and candid with. If they can’t think of anyone, offer to be their accountability partner. All of this will help the cutter as they attempt to put off their old nature (i.e., carnal habits and desires), and put on their new nature (i.e., Godly habits and desires). Third, help the cutter to understand who they are in Christ. Many of the problems that cutters have stems from a sinful and distorted perception of who they are (e.g., they might think they’re ugly, stupid, worthless, etc). Thus, if pastors, youth ministers, parents, or guardians can help cutters to understand who they truly are in the eyes of Christ, some of their problems might be alleviated or lessened. The following verses are extremely useful in helping the cutter establish a Godly perception of themselves:

- I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, and *that* my soul knows very well (Psalm 139:14).
- The LORD has appeared of old to me, *saying*: “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; Therefore with loving kindness I have drawn you (Jeremiah 31:3).
- For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10)
- Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

How does God look at you? Answer: You are fearfully and wonderfully made; God loves you with an everlasting love; we are justified (declared righteous and sinless, regardless of how bad we previously were); and we are created for good works, not bad works (e.g., cutting).

Once a young person understands how God looks at them, the pastor, youth minister, parent, or guardian should take them through the following verses (though not all at once). It might be helpful to prescribe some of the verses as “homework” to look up while the cutter is away from you, and review them when you meet up again.

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<sup>9</sup> Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17).

## What the Bible says about Cutting<sup>10</sup>

God does not want us to hurt or damage our bodies because they are His temple (Miller & Miller, 2006).

- “Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6: 19-20).

The false peace that comes from cutting is fleeting—true peace is lasting (Miller & Miller, 2006).

- “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).
- “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And *whatever* you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him” (Colossians 3: 15-17).

Change happens when we choose to think as God thinks about self-injury (Miller & Miller, 2006).

- “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24).
- “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3: 5).

God is greater than the temptation (Miller & Miller, 2006).

- “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6).
- “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

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<sup>10</sup> From Miller, P. A., & Miller, K. R. (2006). *Quick scripture reference for counseling youth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. A great resource for any pastor or youth worker.