

Treating Self-injurious Behaviors in Traumatized Adolescents

Part I: Modern Theory and Etiology

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Intentional, self-effected bodily harm
of a socially-inappropriate nature,
without direct suicidal intent

- Onset: Adolescence or preadolescence
- Offset: Often by early adulthood
- Complex relationship to suicidality



Types of self-injury

- Cutting torso or extremities
- Burning
- Self-stabbing or piercing
- Self-biting or chewing
- Picking at wounds or scabs
- Head banging
- Punching or hitting oneself
- More extreme behaviors

Etiology: Reactive Avoidance model

- Early trauma, child abuse, child neglect, and/or attachment disturbance
 - In fewer cases, dysregulated neurobiology (e.g., autism spectrum)
- Imbalance between:
 - Triggerable attachment/trauma-related memories and subsequent distress
 - Inadequate emotional tolerance/regulation

Etiology: Reactive Avoidance model

- Presence of reminiscent stimulus (“trigger”) in relational environment
 - Perceived disattunement/disengagement, rejection, abandonment, unfair treatment, abuse-similar danger, criticism, shame
- Source attribution errors
- Self-injury as way to avoid full experience of negative overwhelming states

Avoidance functions of SIB

- Distraction from emotional pain
- Externalization/displacement
- Communication of distress
- Proximity-seeking
- Relief from dissociation/numbing
- Self-punishment to reduce shame or guilt
- Increased sense of control

Frequent comorbidities

- Suicidality
- Borderline personality traits
 - Problems with BPD explanations alone
- Depression
- Posttraumatic stress
- Dissociation

References

- Briere J (2019). *Treating risky and compulsive behavior in trauma survivors*. NY: Guilford.
- Briere J & Eadie E (2016). Compensatory self-injury in the general population: Adverse events, posttraumatic stress, and the mediating role of dissociation. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research & Practice*, 8, 618-625.
- Briere, J, Lanktree, CB & Semple, RJ (2019). *Using ITCT-A to treat self-injury in traumatized youth*. Los Angeles, CA: USC Adolescent Trauma Training Center, NCTSN.
- Walsh, BW (2012). *Treating self-injury: A practical guide* (2nd edition). NY: Guilford.

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Part II: Intervention

Monday January 25, 2021
12:00 to 1:00pm PST (GMT -08:00)

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