

AlbertMohler.com

Playing With Knives — A Growing Problem

Monday, March 20, 2006

Something has gone wrong in a society that must come to grips with a growing problem of self-mutilation. Some now estimate that as many as 2 million Americans — most of them very young — are cutting themselves.

Rachel Houston reports on the issue in *World Magazine*, looking at the problem as experienced by Kelly Campbell, a student at a Christian college :

Miss Campbell had begun hurting herself when she was 12, purposely bruising her body by running into things or hitting herself with blunt objects. In college, she said she felt “overwhelmed and really shy,” and found that focusing on physical pain helped her to forget her emotional pain: “I didn’t have to explode—it was easy and quick,” and actually gave her a sense of exhilaration. Like many cutters, Miss Campbell tried cutting her stomach, chest, foot, and upper legs, but favored cutting her arms because they were less painful and because, “I wanted scars, and arms were something I could see.”

Miss Campbell also cut herself because she wanted to feel special: “I wanted something that was unique about me. I knew other people did it so I felt a sense of belonging. It was my secret.” Gradually, Miss Campbell began cutting herself every day. Other self-injurers also say that cutting helps relieve inner agony. Wendy Lader, a psychologist who co-directs SAFE (Self-Abuse Finally Ends) Alternatives, said about 50 percent of self-injurers have a history of sexual or physical abuse. Others have problems vocalizing their emotions—self-injury allows them to temporarily forget emotional pain.

More:

Dr. Sony Khemlani, a psychologist specializing in self-injury at the Institute for Bio-behavioral Therapy and Research, told WORLD that cutting “becomes an addictive behavior very quickly,” because cutters take pleasure in their action “and that results in the release of endorphins.” She said cutters usually become addicted between the fifth and 20th times they do it. Cutting quickly formed a part of Miss Campbell’s daily routine. After her last class, she would return to her room, run a safety pin under water, and begin slicing her left arm—usually between the elbow and wrist. Occasionally, Miss Campbell made specific designs. Once, she carved a Chinese symbol. Another time she wrote the word happy.

Christianity Today reported on this problem in 2004, alerting parents with a statistic that 51-percent of respondents at one poll indicated that they had either cut themselves as a teen or knew someone who did. In “[The Razor’s Edge](#),” T. Suzanne Eller reported:

This behavior has many different names: cutting; self-injury; self-mutilation; self-violence. It’s defined as a deliberate, repetitive, and non-life-threatening harming of one’s body that not only includes cutting, but also scratching, picking scabs, burning, punching, infecting oneself, bruising or breaking bones, or hair pulling.

Self-injury crosses economic brackets, education, race, and age. While there are both male and female self-injurers, the majority are middle- to upper-class adolescent girls. Because self-injury often is hidden, it’s hard to pinpoint exact statistics. But one thing’s clear: Self-injury is a growing trend, and it’s not confined to teens outside the church. As a youth worker, I’ve connected with Christian teens for more than 15 years. Until two years ago, self-injury was rarely mentioned. In the past two years, that has changed.

Many parents have shared their private pain at conferences, relief on their faces when the topic was broached in a workshop. In my home church, two teens struggling with self-injury have shared their stories with me in the past month.

Parents — be alert and aware.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.