

## "Cutters" - Self harming.

Recently I came across a blog that was a collection of stories by "Cutters". Those people who self harm or self mutilate. That is they deface themselves physically in some form either by cutting self, burning self, biting self, pinching self, picking at ones self and so forth.

### Comments

As I have said before blogs seem to allow people to be more candid in what they say about themselves and this can provide invaluable information. To get information from cutters, who are often people in their teens or young adulthood is a difficult thing to do. In face to face discussions I have always found them to be much more reluctant than I have found with those who talk about self harming in blogs. Below are a few examples:

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I'm 27 yrs. old and have been cutting for a few years. It's been burning before that. At the time, I completely thought that the cutting was rational and logical. It equalled to or amounted to more than what I was feeling at the time. But now I look at my left arm (for some odd reason it's the only place I've hurt myself), and I sometimes feel pangs of regret for it all. I carved in the words pain and numb, and the worst cutting incident happened a few months ago.

Me and my fiancé hit a really rocky patch. It was horrible. My heart was breaking at that moment and I needed something, anything, to dull it, numb it. I grabbed my stash of razors and headed for the parking lot behind our apartment we used to live in.

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I was just curious as to everyone's preference of object used while cutting/injuring themselves....

i've used a knife, a compass (the math kind), safety pins, fingernails, teeth, a razor blade, and probably some other stuff I can't think of right now

i only used an actual razor once and i don't understand how people can use razors. maybe i just prefer the dull pain of sawing at a cut until it's deep enough to seep

blood in place of the quick sharp pain of a razor that shows a cut seconds later, though they are good for writing words.

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This is a personal monologue I performed for my basic acting course a couple of weeks ago. It kind of messed me up for a while but I think I'm back to resisting my addiction. In my mind cutting is an addiction. I just wanted to share this with all of you.

I've been wanting to tell you and talk to you for ages, before you find out. Some of my friends know and they gave me some moral support and helped me tell some other people. And I really want to stop and I've been working hard on it, I mean, the first step is always realising you have a problem and wanting to fix it, right? I can't even say it. I'm sorry. It's-It's easier to just show you. I cut. I cut myself, I'm a cutter.

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i feel like i want to die. why is it when my friends are sad or upset i feel compelled to cut myself to take over their pain. it kills me every time deep inside! i just wish that the world would end. there is just so much that troubles me i hate everything any more i know i should be happy but i feel like shit. i did cut myself tonight one word on my flesh....death.

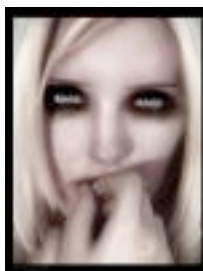
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hi i am a new member i am 17 and have been cutting for four years now and every night all i seem to think about is cutting but i seem to be able to resist it... most of the time

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I'm 17 and i'm a cutter. I don't think i'm writing this just so everyone can know that "I'm" a cutter but just cause i don't want to feel alone in this anymore. I have only got caught once and i've been doing this for like 4 years. I used to cut my wrist until my friend found out and she told... so then now I cut my stomach. Its much easier to hide it if you do it there. Its kind of weird to explain any of this. Its hard to believe that i'm not the only one that feels this way. I hold everything in and i hide everything behind this invisible mask. and then i cut myself to relieve the pain that i hold inside.

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Hi i'm Nick and i'm 15. I haven't cut in...i stopped counting the days because it depresses me. But over 167 days. The first time i was three and it lasted until i was 8 and then i started at 12 and that lasted until i was 14. It was really bad

when i was 14 and i got caught and now i can't cut. AND IT HURTS SO MUCH. sometimes at night i just go into the bathroom and clutch the razors and cry. I want it so badly.

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Hi, my name is \*\*\*\*\*, and I am 16. I have been cutting since I was about 12. I am from Biloxi, Mississippi. I love the scars that are left. I also love to burn myself with a lighter. Right now I have about 30 cut scars, and 2 burn scars. I have been trying to quit, but somehow I seem to go back to it. I have been institutionalised (i think thats how you spell it) twice for cutting. I have attempted suicide 3 times. 2 by overdose, and one by almost hitting a major artery in my wrist. The reason I cut is because my mother never shows me any affection, she has never told me she loves me, or kissed me or shown any love towards me at all.



### Cutting and suicidal ideation

There is a common belief that if one cuts or self mutilates then they are suicidal. This is not so. There can be three groups in this way. First there are those who do self mutilate but have no suicidal ideas or urges. They are at little risk of suicide but are at risk of potentially permanently and significantly damaging them self with the self mutilation gone wrong. Second there are those who can have strong and persistent suicidal urges who have no desire to self mutilate. Thirdly there are those who are both suicidal and self mutilate.

Obviously if one is working with a person who self mutilates (or expresses suicidal urges) then it is advisable to firstly begin to understand which group the individual belongs to. Sometimes the lines between them are very clear and sometimes they are much less clear. Often parents can be convinced their son or

daughter is suicidal because they have cut self, an obvious conclusion to come to for a distraught parent, but sometimes it is simply not the case.

Bodily mutilation as normal?

Now I will set about normalising 'cutting'. Humans have been physically mutilating themselves and others since time began. Circumcision is a clear example. That is a clear example of genital mutilation. I remember along time ago in my studies of anthropology learning that some of the Australian Aborigines practised subincision (As a male so I would remember this!). An cut is made along the urethra on the underside of the penis. In some cases the cut goes from the head of the penis right to the scrotum. Now that is what you call bodily mutilation!

Alas guys it does not end there. Customary unilateral castration (monorchy) is known in central Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, southern Africa, and some Australian Aborigines. Bilateral castration was common to produce eunuchs for Muslim harem attendants and for several centuries to produce male sopranos or contraltos called castrati for ecclesiastical chants in the Roman Catholic church.



Culturally sanctioned self mutilation

Females fair no better in some countries and over history I'm afraid. FGM as it is politely referred to these days or female genital mutilation.

Female modifications include excision (of part or all of the clitoris — clitoridectomy, female circumcision — and sometimes also of the labia, mons, or both), in much of Africa, ancient Egypt, India, Malaysia, and Australia; Incision (of the external genitalia, without removal of any part) among the Totonac (Mexico) and tropical South American Indians; Infibulation (induced adhesion of the labia minora, leaving only a small orifice, to prevent sexual intercourse until the orifice is reopened by incision) in the Horn of Africa and among some Arabs; Dilatation (of the vaginal orifice, often with incision) among some Australian Aborigines; Elongation of the labia (tablier), recorded for southern Africa and the Caroline Islands; Artificial defloration (among Australian Aborigines and elsewhere).

In psychological terms genital mutilation would generally be considered more indicative of problems than cutting of say the arms or the legs. So here we have many examples of cultures having mutilated the genitals of their constituents for many years. So in this sense there is nothing odd about the actual act of mutilating the human body. In this sense it is normal. In addition to these are many other examples of tattooing and scarification, removal of teeth, teeth sharpening, neck lengthening, binding the hands and feet to make them smaller, not to forget all the cosmetic surgery that is now almost endemic in the country where I live. Most of these bodily mutilations which are usually completely voluntary and have been around in many cultures since humans first evolved. Most people when confronted with a person who cuts will be perplexed with the 'abnormality' of the act. My point here is that mutilating the human body, by others or by yourself is not an abnormal act at all.

Why?

However when one begins to look at why the bodily mutilation occurred then we do find a difference. A woman who goes and gets her breasts enlarged does it so she believes she looks more sexually attractive in her community. Or a man may cut long scars in his chest so he can later expose the scar tissue to others knowing that it is a sign of increased status in his community. Another man may cut long incisions in his stomach because he feels so numb and distressed its the only way he can begin to feel something. Two very different scenarios. So what are some of the reasons why a person would be a cutter.

1. The tattooing type of cut. Some teenagers can cut (or whatever else) self because it is what the gang (peer group) do. The scar becomes the symbol of belonging to the group and it is their secret ritual that separates them from others, particularly the parents. This is similar to members of a motorcycle club who get a tattoo which signifies them as a member. This type of self mutilation

usually does not indicate significant emotional distress in the teenager. The mutilation is often minor and often transitory because it hurts too much.



Posh Spice self mutilation?

A derivative of this seems to be the case where the individual cuts a word into self and thus gets the resultant word scarified into the skin. One of the examples above mentioned a man who cut the word "death" into his skin. Or the example of the 16 year old girl who kept count of her cut scars and burn scars. The scarification symbolises something to the person and the goal is to find out what it is a symbol of and then you know what you are working with.

2. Some report that cutting "makes me feel real". The technical term for this is derealization. The individual feels there is a sort of gap between them and reality. They feel detached from it. The act of cutting or burning with the resultant pain and then seeing the blood flow allows that 'gap' to disappear for a period of time and thus one gains a sense of normality or reality. This most often happens because the Child ego state is excluded. Once the individual begins to access that part of themselves again the derealization reduces and the need for self mutilation should reduce.

3. Similar to number 2 is the person who says that the cutting, "makes me feel something". In this case there is no sense of not being connected with reality but with just having very little feeling at all. The person reports feeling numb or just nothing. In some of my work with street kids (homeless) I have seen them on a bitterly cold day just wearing a light t-shirt. They simply do not feel the cold.



In such cases it is quite likely that the Child ego state is also very shut off and accessing it again would seem to be the course of action to take. Of course in 2 and 3 the Child ego state has become shut off for some reason and when one begins to reopen it up again those reasons are going to become obvious. Usually it is because the person has suffered some form of trauma, often repeated trauma in their life and the feelings about that will resurface when the Child ego state is reopened. In numbers 2 and 3 one can begin to understand how the cutting could become addictive as some 'cutters' report it is. It is the one form of temporary relief that they have.

4. Cutting for tension relief. If the Child ego state is shut down then that works fine in the short term. It stops the painful feelings and makes them 'go away'. However they do not go away they just sit there in the person and in the long term they start to get 'louder'. When this happens a symptom of some kind will develop. Some get depressed, some have panic attacks, some get phobias, some hit the bottle or others can begin to cut self. An unexpressed feeling will simply grow in volume the longer it remains unexpressed. In this sense a tension can be seen to grow in a person and cutting maybe one way in which to release some of that tension. And it works, but only in the short term, unfortunately it comes back if it is not expressed in a satisfying form which cutting cannot provide. If it did then the tension would not come back.

5. Finally there is the shock value of the self mutilation. As I mentioned before most people will be shocked when they find out and see the scars of a person who has self mutilated. It is dramatic and it is attention grabbing in most cases. Does the cutter create scars that are in a visible position on the body or do they only do it where it is quite unlikely someone will see it. If the person is doing such scarring so it gets attention then one needs to find out why such a attention seeking is necessary for that individual.



In the city where I live if a person goes into a health centre of some sort and shows the scars to the 'health professional' then by law that professional must take some action such as recommending hospitalisation. If they do not do this then they could face possible de-registration or possible litigation for not providing an adequate duty of care. So if someone wants to go to hospital or be put into the health care system then all they have to do is show the results of their self mutilation to the appropriate person. Such a thing gets a great deal of attention.

This is not meant to be a complete list of reasons why cutters, cut. In fact I am sure it is incomplete but it is a start and I will add to it when appropriate.

## **Cutters part 2**

I have written a posting before on 'cutters' which is how people who self mutilate often refer to themselves. I thought it was timely to revisit the concept with some more information. The other reason is that yesterday there was a very large piece in a local newspaper here on self mutilation. It draws on information provided by a psychiatrist and a clinical psychologist who work at a children's hospital.

They are reported as saying

"Self-harm has nothing to do with attention seeking"

"Self-harming was not an attention seeking strategy..."

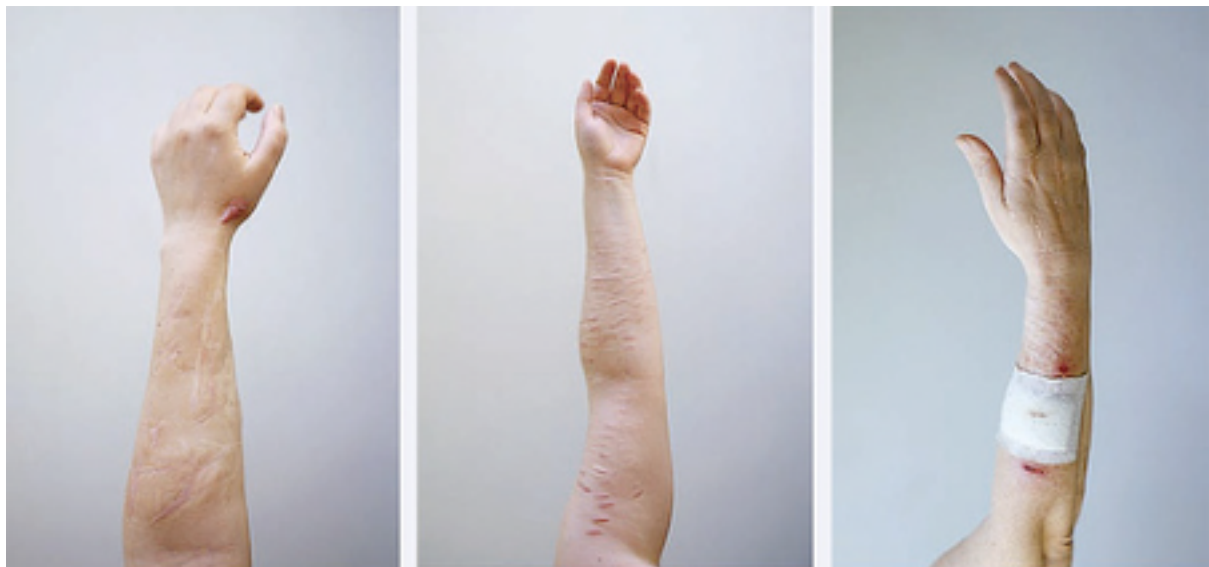
These statements are simply wrong. I have worked with many self harmers and there is a sub group of cutters who self-harm to seek attention. If you get to know some of them they will openly admit they they cut to gain attention or to manipulate. In their more lucid times they will sit there and tell you to your face

that they do it for those reasons. So one does not have to be a rocket scientist to work it out.

So the psychologist and psychiatrist at PMH seem to have got it wrong. However to be fair to them they are probably stating the 'company line'. It is politically incorrect to say that self-harmers cut self to manipulate or seek attention. To state that would not be good for the hospital. Its not good for business as it presents what is considered a less than caring persona for PMH. The problem is that it is true that some self-harm to seek attention.

#### Attention seeking and manipulation

There is shock value in self mutilation. As I mentioned before most people will be shocked when they see the scars of a person who has self mutilated. It is dramatic and it is attention grabbing. I have had people walk up to me and expose their forearms and show me the cuts they have just recently made. If someone does that then the vast majority of people seeing it will take some action to get that person to some immediate medical attention. (There is that word - attention!).



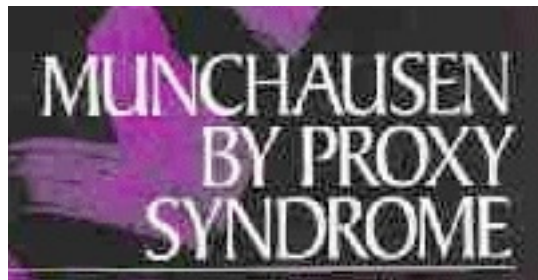
There are some self-harmers who seek such attention AND there are some who don't. There are some who will only cut self on parts of the body that are rarely seen in public and they will go to considerable lengths to keep the scars hidden. Obviously these people are not cutting self to seek attention or manipulate circumstances.

So to label all cutters as attention seekers is very unfair to those who are not seeking such attention. One needs to separate the two groups. Also there is a common faulty belief that if a person is cutting self to gain attention or manipulate then you just ignore them and write them off as 'just' attention

seeking. Of course one does not do that. One continues to deal with them but in a different way. If someone is making half hearted suicide attempts one does not simply just ignore the person, you still work with them but in a different way than with someone who is more serious about ending their life.

### Munchausen Syndrome

There is a condition known as Munchausen Syndrome (also called Factitious disorder). This is presented in diagnostic systems like the DSM-IV. In Munchausen Syndrome the person harms self with the purpose of taking on the sick role, so as to get attention and caring and the feeling of being looked after (to get positive strokes). It is direct self-harming for attention and manipulation as the person is quite aware they are doing it. This is a clearly defined and commonly acknowledged psychological condition that is accepted around the world. For some reason the mental health staff at PMH have decided that it somehow does not exist or is somehow wrong.



To finish on an side note

Baron von Munchausen is a character in European mythology. The Baron's stories are taken to be outrageous and fanciful lies. This is the origin of the name of "Munchausen's Syndrome".

Tony White  
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