

Suicide and self harm

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Suicide and self harm involve two completely different psychological processes although often the layman puts them together.

Having said that one can have three groups:
Those who are suicidal and not self harming
Those who are self harming and not suicidal
Those who are both suicidal and self harming

Some people will have both but they still involve quite different psychological motivations.



The truly suicidal individual has the definitive feature of having a Don't exist injunction or has made the 'suicide decision'. This is the psychological process that makes for the 'true' suicidal person. A message they have in their head, that for some reason they, others or the world would be better off if they were dead.

Self harming has nothing to do with the Don't exist injunction. Instead it serves other psychological functions such as described below:

1. Gang behaviour tattooing type of self harm that gives a sense of belonging.
2. To make self feel real.
3. To make self feel something.
4. Tension relief and stress build up relief.
5. For manipulation and to get attention.

None of these include a Don't exist decision nor is self harm about attempting to kill self. Instead the self harm is being done for the alternative reasons just cited.



However there are some people who do make suicidal statements and gestures who are not suicidal. These people are not suicidal as it is never their goal to kill self and they do not have a Don't exist injunction. If they do die by their own hand then it is an accident, not a suicide as their intent was not to kill self. Some make these gestures for manipulation of some kind. People can use both self harm and suicidal gestures for manipulative reasons.

Self harm prejudice

There was an article in today's newspaper on self harming. Quite a good statement of what the literature says in general as it did in particular highlight a prejudice that is commonly, if not very regularly found in the writings on self harm.



There are a number of reasons why people self harm with four listed below

1. Cutting self to release stress and tension
2. Cutting self to get a sense of feeling real
3. Cutting self to manipulate others
4. Cutting self to get attention



Some self harm for these reasons

For some reason numbers 3 and 4 are seen in a derogatory light by the general public and indeed in the technical literature as well. For instance the article being discussed states, "While some have mistakenly viewed SIB (Self-injurious behaviour) as a "call for help" or a type of attention seeking behaviour, it is generally a highly secret activity, with self injurers usually going to extensive lengths to conceal the wounds".

Why has the article used the word 'mistakenly'. What is wrong with self harming to get attention?

Number 1 cuts self to release tension and number 4 cuts self to get attention. Both engage in self harm for a clear psychological gain, the first to release tension and the second to get attention. What is the difference?



There is more than one way to solve a problem

There is a belief out there, sometimes stated and sometimes not that when a person does attention seeking behaviour they are considered pathetic, amoral, inferior or words to that effect. One is viewed in quite a poor light. This is for self harmers and other attention seekers.

Support groups for self harmers are quite vigorous in downplaying those who self harm to manipulate or seek attention. Understandably so, as they are wanting the public to view self harmers in a better light. Some groups try to

deny that there are any who self harm for attention or at least play down the numbers of such people. In some ways it has now become sort of politically incorrect to say that a person cuts self so as to gain attention.



It took five minutes to find this on the internet. There are thousands who are willing to put their self harming and their faces onto the internet for the whole world to see. Yes some do self harm very privately and there are others who are public about it. Obviously different motives are in play.

Whilst all this is good and well there is just one problem. There are people who do self harm to get attention and to manipulate others. For instance the woman who cuts self because she knows that will get her placed in hospital for a couple of days. Or the person who self harms because they know that their suicidal statements will then be taken more seriously. What about these people? Not only do the general public tend to look down on them but the self harm support groups deny they even exist!

So these people:

3. Cutting self to manipulate others
4. Cutting self to get attention

have become the lepers of the leper colonies. They are at the bottom of the bottom of the pile. The support groups leave these people in a worse position.



An example of this becomes apparent when one reads about what can be done to help self harmers. The focus is on those who self harm for reasons such as tension release or to get a sense of 'realness'. One finds very little written on what you do for those who self harm to manipulate others. Why would one write about them when people say they don't really exist anyway.

There is very little written on what treatment one uses for those who self harm to manipulate others or to get attention. Again, how can there be as it is seen as politically incorrect to make such an assertion in the first place.

One treatment strategy I have used with such people is working with their stroke filters in conjunction with an adaptation of the no-suicide contract which in essence is a no-self harm contract. In addition assisting the person to shift to cognitive self harming.

Cognitive self harming

A 27 year old male recently reported that when he gets very down he creates visual scenarios in his mind. In essence fantasies. Typically he does this when he goes to bed at night. They are very violent and always involve him getting hurt. For instance he imagines himself being stabbed or shot by someone or he will imagine himself shooting, stabbing or cutting himself with big knives.

He found himself quite disturbed by such images and worried that he will act them out. People rarely do such a thing as there is a very big difference between thinking violent thoughts and actually acting on such thoughts and he felt more reassured as a result.



Of course no one makes up such repetitive visual fantasies images unless they some psychological advantage from doing so. His Child ego state must be getting something out of them or he would not repeatedly do such visualisations.

After some enquiry it turns out that such visualisations made him feel better. He felt a sense of relief afterwards, he found that it relaxed him and reduced the tension he was feeling previously. Precisely what some self harmers can feel, which is of course the reason why they self harm in the first place.

In essence he was self harming, not in reality but in his mind. He was fantasising self harm and gaining the psychological benefits from doing so. In this instance a sense of relief and a reduction of his tension and stress. A most interesting scenario.

Of course there is nothing wrong with having violent fantasies as long as they are not acted on. Lots of people have violent fantasises and only a very small group actually act on them. So he had found an effective solution to his problem. He had found a way to get a sense of relief from his stress that was not harmful to himself or anyone else.

As a result one can use this strategy with self harmers. To facilitate them using cognitive self harming rather than actually physically self harming.