

# Self harm, sex addiction & dissociation

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## Placing self harm in a wider context

The 8 most common motives for self harm

1. Self harming as part of gang tattooing behaviour.
2. Self harming to make self feel real which can be found in those who dissociate.
3. Self harming to make self feel something and cope with a 'numbness'.
4. Self harming used as a means of tension relief and to release pressure build up.
5. Self harming as a physical expression of emotional pain. Self harming is seen as providing concrete evidence of the pain.
6. Self harming as a means to self nurture. It allows the person to care for self as can be found in Munchausen Syndrome.
7. Self harming as a means to punish self and an expression of self hatred.
8. Self harming as a means to manipulate others or as a cry for help.

Some self harmers will report an addictive quality to their self harming. They find it hard to resist these actions as does one who has an addiction to drugs. In these cases self harming serves some important psychological function for the individual. This is mostly found in those who self harm to:

Make self feel real which can be found in those who dissociate.  
Make self feel something and cope with a 'numbness'.  
As a means of tension relief and to release pressure build up.

In each of these cases the self harming provides some kind of psychological gain which the person can not obtain by other less damaging means. To feel something and reduce a sense of numbness, to reduce the dissociation and to provide a way of releasing a sense of tension or pressure build up. They achieve these through self harming and become addicted as it is their only way they know how to.

Take a minute to reconsider self harm. To cut self or burn self one could say is an intense physical, emotional and psychological experience. It slaps the person in the face, they have strong physical feelings, possibly a sensation of adrenaline, often feelings of secrecy, shame, and a sense of what will happen to me in the future. The person certainly has a sense of aliveness. It seems reasonable to

suggest that this physiological state would counter a sense of numbness or dissociation and possibly provide a sense of release from tension when the experience subsides.

If self harm is seen in this light one finds that humans can achieve this same kind of intense physical, emotional and psychological experience in a whole variety of ways. Indeed any activity that creates such strong emotions and psychological experience could be psychologically equivalent to self harming for the three reasons cited above.

Activities which create intense fear would include dangerous sporting pursuits such as BASE jumping, caving, mountain climbing, race car driving, surfing huge waves and so forth. Such fear could be achieved in the business world when one risks everything in a business deal or the stock market. When one makes brazen political decisions. Involvement in criminal activity could also result in the same intense emotional and psychological experience. Involvement in some sections of the military or police could also serve the same function.



### Sex addiction as self harm

All these will result in an intense physical, emotional and psychological experience, just as cutting self can. Indeed the other human activity that can create such intense feelings and experience is sex. It seems plausible that the

sex addict maybe doing the same as the 'cutter' who reports a sense of addiction to the self harming. The intense feelings allow a reduction in tension build up, reduces the sense of numbness or allows the dissociation to be temporarily relieved.

When viewed in this wider context those who self harm by cutting or burning are not all that odd after all. In fact a significant section of the normal community may be doing the same using more socially acceptable means than by cutting ones arms with a razor blade. Indeed our high profile sex addicts in the press, may psychologically be doing the same as the 20 something girl who burns herself with cigarettes.

Through the intensity of the sexual experience some may find a way to relieve a sense of dissociation or numbness temporarily. It seems that some could use sex for such a psychological purpose and hence the addiction.

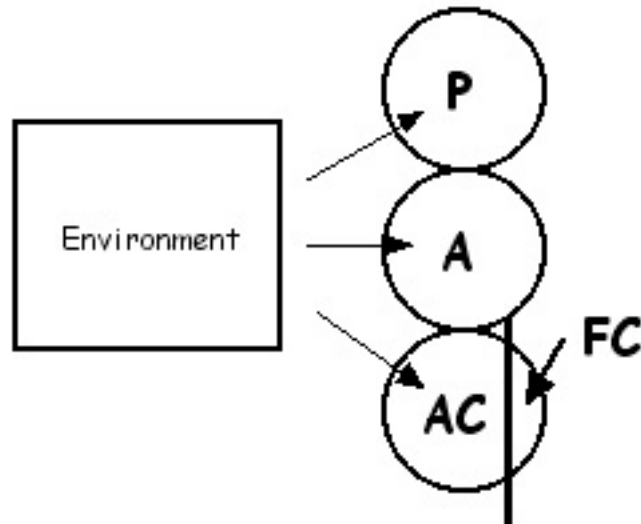
#### The mechanism of dissociation

Dissociation in essence uses the censorship model of personality development. It works in the same way as government censorship of movies. Why does government make it illegal for a young child to see a violent, horror movie? It is assumed that it would be damaged psychologically. The government hides the movie from the young child.

The Free Child ego state is that part of the personality that is conceptualised as being the most sensitive and vulnerable. It is where we have the most intimate and sensitive contact with others. It allows us to meet with others and understand ourselves in the most sensitive and vulnerable ways. It is where we have a true understanding of who we are.

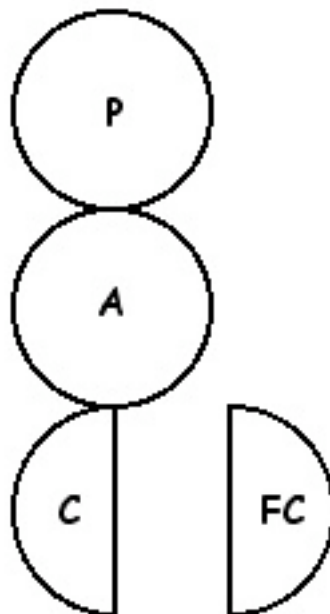
If a youngster is subjected to very adverse parenting styles then it's the same as a child seeing a horror movie, it will be damaged. One solution is to use a self censorship model. The child thinks, "I can deal with the physical and verbal abuse by hiding from it. If I hide from it then it does not really matter or it cannot really hurt me". The child then sets about hiding the sensitive part of itself, the Free Child ego state. And this works at least to some degree.

I would suggest there are two different levels of this self censorship by the youngster that both use the same model of survival. First there is desensitisation which could be diagrammed as such:



The person sets up a psychological barrier that isolates the Free Child and this results in desensitisation. This allows the child to receive abuse but it has less impact because the child has adjusted psychologically such that it gets used to it. When a child sees mother bashed for the first time it has a big impact, when it sees mother bashed for the 20th time the impact is less. It has adjusted by partitioning off the Free Child. The censorship is working.

If the abuse is more severe then censorship by desensitisation is not enough and the child has to take more drastic action. One solution is to dissociate. This can be diagrammed as such:



In dissociation the Free Child aspect of the personality is split away from the rest of the personality

This is more severe censorship in the desire to hide from the 'horror movie'. The Free Child is split off from the personality. This hides the sensitive aspects of the personality and the person gets a sense of, "That is not me". The person reports that when they were being abused it was kind of like they were standing separate and watching a stranger being abused. Torture victims often report this when recounting their episodes of torture as do bulimics some times as they vomit into the toilet bowl. It feels like they are standing back and watching this stranger vomiting.



This is a main difference between desensitisation and dissociation. With desensitisation there is not a sense of "That is not me". With dissociation there is a sense of self alienation. And the censorship works at least to some degree. The Free Child is protected from future assaults. The problem is the censorship continues into adulthood and humans can not survive psychologically without reasonable access to the Free Child part of the personality. If the Free Child censorship continues then some symptom will develop whether that be depression, anxiety, substance abuse, insomnia, OCD, eating disorders, sex problems and so on endlessly.

With such symptoms the Free Child is shouting loudly that it's still here and wants to be allowed back in. If therapy assists the Free Child to be allowed back then the symptoms will subside. In addition we are now afforded a theoretical explanation of how self harming works for dissociation. The individual bombards self with very intense stimuli which causes the Free Child to have a strong and intense physical and psychological reaction. This allows the Free Child to again be re-experienced instead of cut off and thus one gains a sense of reconnection or wholeness in the personality. Unfortunately it's only temporary. The intense stimuli can be cutting self with a razor blade, some sexual experiences or engaging in high risk behaviour.