Only Hurting Themselves: The Trend of Self-Harm

Everyone knows that teenagers and young adults are prone to engaging in some pretty risky behavior. Most often drinking, drug use and promiscuity come to mind. Teenage risk taking is, after all, pretty synonymous with partying, drinking, smoking and unprotected sex. However, in recent years, a more startling and macabre form of reckless behavior has been surfacing, especially in teens with a history of mental disorders. Throughout the last decade, self-injury has been steadily increasing in popularity. (Cusick)

Self-injury is described as “the deliberate, direct destruction or alteration of body tissue without conscious suicidal intent.” (Kennedy 20.) It is more common than one may think. It is estimated that 14 out of every 1000 people in the general population have self-injured at one point in their life. In one study, eight percent of college students admitted to using self-injury as a way to cope. (Kennedy 20) Teenagers and young adults are the most common age group to self-injure, with 14-15% of students in another study have self-injured at least once. (Klonsky 1046) In recent years, the number of teens who seek help for self-harm has climbed steadily, according to Dr. Colleen Cusick, an adolescent psychologist.

Why do students self-injure? There are usually two main reasons someone may commit acts of self harm. The first reason is that they feel too much and wish to temporarily dull their
feelings of anxiety, depression, frustration or other negative feelings. The second reason is that they are longing to feel anything at all. (Kennedy 20) After a while, though, self-injury has a tendency to become habit-forming. "I think that when people first start self-injuring they are overloaded and feeling too much--too much anger, stress, sadness, frustration--so they cut," said Wendy Lader, clinical director of the Self-Abuse Finally Ends (S.A.F.E.) Alternatives program says. “And, it does help them to mute those feelings. However, when it becomes habitual, and they have learned to get rid of all their feelings; then, they get very numb. They have stuffed those feelings away, and now they are left wanting to feel something.” (Kennedy 20) Self-injury becomes a vicious cycle of feeling too much and too little and can lead to an addiction. People who self-injure also typically have a higher frequency of negative emotions and low self-esteem. (Klonsky 1047)

What are the causes of the negative feelings that lead students to self-injure? Some, including Dr. Cusick, believe the rising trend of self-injury is partially tied in with the prevalence of bullying. “Today more than ever, students must face an increasing amount of bullying and harassment,” Cusick says. “This can lead to a very negative self-image, which can drive kids to dangerous things.” Bullying is a frighteningly common occurrence in today’s school environment. A survey of 40,000 high school aged students revealed that half of students admit to engaging in bullying behavior towards their peers. Another 47% say that they themselves have been the victims of this hurtful behavior. (Goodwin 82) Bullying includes a very wide range of behaviors including “humiliating, harassing, gossiping, spreading rumors, and shunning or exclusion” as well as threats of or acts of physical harm. (Alude 154)
Unfortunately, some students have a natural tendency to bully. Bullying makes them fit in and feel accepted, which is what the majority of students are after in the first place. (Goodwin 82) Bullying is a problem because it “infringes on the child's right to human dignity, privacy, freedom and security.” (Aluede 151) Bullying is sometimes underestimated though, because it often goes unreported. According to bullying researcher Dan Olweus, victims of bullying “often look upon themselves as failures and feel stupid, ashamed, and unattractive.” A national survey given to students in high school recently concluded that only about 36% of victims report the behavior, and usually only after physical violence has been used. (Goodwin 83)

The typical victims of bullying tend to have higher levels of depressive behavior and lower levels of self-worth. (Goodwin 83) So what happens to students who are the victims of bullying? According to Dr. Cusick, they turn inward. Because the victims tend to have low self-esteem, they may be more likely to believe the bully’s hurtful words and view themselves in the way the bully portrays them. Dr. Cusick believes that the rise in teen self-mutilation and the wide extent of bullying in school environments is correlation, not coincidence. The types of students bullied are the same types of students who are more likely to practice self-injury. (Goodwin 83, Cusick)

Perhaps not coincidentally, many students who self-injure feel the need to hide it. Self-injurers may feel like outcasts or freaks because of their behavior. They will often wear multiple bracelets long sleeves to hide the marks, regardless of the weather. It is estimated that of all those individuals who self-injure, only about half of them will seek help for the behavior. (Kennedy 20).
Another explanation for the increase in teen self-injury is the increase in teenage depression and other mood disorders. According to a longitudinal study done in 2009, the occurrence of diagnosed mood disorders including bipolar disorder, depression and attention deficit disorder have increased in the last decade, especially in teenagers. (Beesdo 646)

“Teenagers have a much higher likelihood of committing self-injury if they are depressed,” says Dr. Cusick. “They use self-injury to try and distract themselves from the emotional pain they are experiencing.” Because of the higher number of teens diagnosed with depression and other mood disorders, it is only natural that the number of teens self-injuring would also increase.

The trend of teens using self-injury as a coping mechanism is frightening, disheartening and dangerous, and with the amount of bullying in schools, students likely will continue to put the blade to their wrists. Research shows that most anti-bullying campaigns put into place by school districts have shown little to no effect on instances of bullying. (Goodwin 156) Without support and a safe environment, there is likely little hope for self-injury numbers to go down.
Works Cited


Cusick, Dr. Colleen Kay. Personal Interview. 11 Oct 2011.

