Careful! Websites may encourage self-injury in teens

Young adults and teens may believe that hurting themselves is normal and acceptable after watching videos and other media on Web-sharing sites like YouTube, new research indicates.

The findings, published in the journal Pediatrics, warn professionals and parents to be aware of the availability and dangers of such material for at-risk teens and young adults.

Deliberate self-injury without the intent of committing suicide is called “nonsuicidal self-injury” or NSSI. An estimated 14% to 24% of youth and young adults engage in this destructive behavior, according to the study. NSSI can also include relationship challenges, mental health symptoms, and risk for suicide and death, the study noted. Common forms of self-injury include cutting, burning, picking and embedding objects to cause pain or harm.

While other studies have looked at the availability of online information about self-injury, the authors focused on the scope of self-injury in videos uploaded on YouTube and watched by youth. They described their work as the first such study and noted that their findings could be relevant in risk, prevention and managing self-injury.

The authors focused on YouTube because, according to the site, since its inception in 2005 “YouTube is the world's most popular online video community, allowing millions of people to discover, watch and share originally-created videos.”

Using the site’s search function the researchers looked for the terms “self-harm” and “self-injury,” identifying the site’s top 50 viewed videos containing a live person, and the top 50 viewed videos with words and photos or visual elements. The top 100 items that the study focused on were viewed over 2 million times, according to the analysis, and most – 80% - were available to a general audience.

The analysis of the self-injury content found that 53% was delivered in a factual or educational tone, while 51% was delivered in a melancholic tone. Pictures and videos commonly showed explicit demonstrations of the self-harming behavior.

Cutting was the most common type of behavior; more than half of the videos did not contain warnings about the graphic nature of the behavior. The average age of uploaders of the self-injury
material was 25.39 years, according to the findings, and 95% were female. The authors surmise that the actual average age is probably younger because many YouTube users say they are older in order to access more content.

The study concludes that the findings about the volume and nature of self-injury content on YouTube show "an alarming new trend among youth and young adults and a significant issue for researchers and mental health workers."

The videos may be a focus for communities of youth in which self-injury is encouraged and viewed as normal and exciting, which could potentially increase the risk for self-injury.

Self-harming is not typical behavior for otherwise untroubled teens and young adults, explained Dr. Charles Raison, an Emory University psychiatrist and CNNHealth.com’s mental health expert. It’s an action that kids with psychiatric problems may try. "NSSI is a young person’s affliction…one in ten will kill themselves," he said. "A lot of people will outgrow the behavior.” Raison explainthat it’s common for troubled young people to share information about hurting themselves.

The study warns that health professionals need to be aware of this type and source of content, and to inquire about it when working with youth who practice self-injury because sites like YouTube can reach youth who may not openly discuss their behavior.