Relationship between Self-Injury and Depression

by Natasha Tracy

Self-Injury and depression go hand-in-hand. Self-injury is known by many names, including self-harm, self-mutilation and self-abuse. It may be referred to by specific ways of self-harm, such as cutting, burning, or banging.

Self-Injury transcends gender, age, religion, educational and income level. It may be accompanied by depression, and/or a range of psychiatric problems such as bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, addictions, eating disorders or psychotic disorders. The longer the self-harm and depression goes unrecognized and untreated, the more disruptive it is to the sufferer’s life and relationships and the more treatment resistant it may become.

Can Self-Injury Lead to Suicide?

Because self-harm (also known as self-injury or self-mutilation) can involve physical injury (such as in the case of self-injury cutting), it can seem like self-harm and suicide are directly related. It’s normal to think that cutting one’s wrist, in the case of self-harm, may be a suicidal gesture; indicating that the person wishes to cut their wrist to die.

However, this is typically not the case. In fact, most people who practice self-injury don’t intend to kill themselves and may even see self-injury as a way of avoiding suicide.

The Relationship Between Self-Harm and Suicide

Self-harm that is not undertaken with the aim of committing suicide is called non-suicidal self-injury and most self-harm falls into this category. People who practice non-suicidal self-injury do so to deal with overwhelming emotions or to feel emotion when none exists. These self provide additional insight into that. And while many people who self-mutilate consider suicide, the act of self-mutilation itself, is not generally a suicidal act.

A minority of people will practice self-harm with suicidal intent, however, so the specific relationship between self-harm and suicide is unclear. And while the act of self-harm has not been shown to lead to suicide, it is understood that the pain that causes people to self-harm may also drive a person to
suicide. This is seen in the following statistics about individuals with a history of non-suicidal self-injury as compared to those without a history of self-harm:

- They were over nine times more likely to report suicide attempts
- They were seven times more likely to report a suicidal gesture
- They were six times more likely to report a suicide plan

Because of these numbers, any act of self-harm should be taken seriously and can alert others to significant emotional distress. It's important to get professional help for self-injury, as a professional is more likely to be able to assess the likelihood of suicide in a person that self-harms. This is critical, as the treatment for non-suicidal self-injury and a suicide attempt are quite different.

Nevertheless, it's important to remember that the majority of people who self-mutilate (60%) report not considering suicide.