
THE CUTTING EDGE

A Newsletter for Women Living With Self-Inflicted Violence

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Welcome to the 32nd issue of **THE CUTTING EDGE**. This issue concludes eight years of publication, and I thank everyone who has made this achievement possible. Please note that I have recently changed computer systems and software and have updated the mailing list. I ask that you take a moment to check your mailing label to make sure all the information on it is correct. Please let me know if there is an error.

I have recently obtained access to the Internet and am interested in learning of sites that concern Self-Inflicted Violence. If you can help, please contact me at Rutamaz@aol.com. Thank you.

SIV: REFLECTIONS ON HEALING

Each anniversary issue of **THE CUTTING EDGE** provides me with an opportunity to reflect on what I've learned over the years. This issue completes eight years of publication of the newsletter, and ten years of active inquiry into the lives of women who live with Self-Inflicted Violence (SIV). There has been increasing interest in self-injury in the mainstream public, as well as in the mental health community, over these years as well.

Perhaps the most striking insight my recent reflection has provided me is the awareness of the extreme disparity between the general public and mental health community's opinions on SIV compared to those of the women who live with it. The opinions of biopsychiatrists and the pharmaceutical industry espouse the idea that behavior depictive of "mental illness" arises from chemical imbalance in the brain. The solution to emotional and mental problems, therefore; is the adjustment of brain chemistry via a variety of expensive and powerful prescription drugs. The society I live in has rarely challenged this perspective, and it is not uncommon for persons to expect chemical solutions for a variety of complex problems. The psychiatric industry is becoming increasingly and more exclusively based on psychopharmacology, de-emphasizing psychotherapy as a solution for mental illness. Some psychiatric residents no longer receive any training in psychotherapy and therefore are personally unfamiliar with its benefits. Insurance companies, in these days of managed care, tend to pay for drugs rather than therapy, and commonly limit psychotherapy to brief sessions for very limited periods of time. Whether by the psychiatric profession, the pharmaceutical industry, the health insurance companies, or the general public, it seems that pills are being peddled over therapy most of the time.

This perspective really stands out to me because, time and again, what I've heard from women who live with SIV is the benefit of experiencing a healing relationship. As this newsletter has been published over

the past eight years, I've come to know quite a few readers who have written to say that they no longer find it necessary or comforting to turn to SIV to manage their lives. They do not often give much credit for their healing, especially in the long term, to drugs nor other biological psychiatric interventions. The most predominant reason I'm given for healing from SIV is a supportive and freeing relationship which allows the woman to explore her SIV while accepting its existence, and then helping heal the psychic wounds from which the need for SIV stems. Once the source of the emotional pain, dissociation, self-hatred and other reasons for SIV is acknowledged and at least begun to be healed, the need for SIV decreases. Eventually most of us no longer need it. Our lives become different enough in the present that the wounds of past traumas do not need to be managed by the physical wounds of SIV. This, of course, is a lengthy and nonlinear process. It is a process of empowerment rather than management.

Certainly very few, if any, of us desire to have SIV in our lives. Yet SIV is a crucial, although oftentimes secret tool of survival for many women. I have yet to meet a woman living with SIV whose life was emotionally secure. SIV appears in the lives of persons who are living with the repercussions of past traumas that have severely narrowed their lives. It is an option, and often a necessity, for those who have deep and open wounds from the past. Unbearable psychic injuries are not managed by normal tools. SIV serves as a tool of survival until growth can evolve the person to a new personal universe that is free from the intense sequelae of past traumas. This freedom brings with it a much greater variety of options from which to choose to manage life's difficulties.

What allows for the transition from survivor to being a person actively alive is often the presence of a guiding helper. That person is oftentimes a compassionate and knowledgeable therapist. A healing relationship can serve as a model for health, an example of the possibilities for living one's life differently. A person who can guide another from the depths of a despairing life is important indeed. This is especially crucial for those who did not experience any, or many, loving relationships in childhood, a scenario that is not uncommon in the lives of those who later turn to SIV. Of course a relationship which is powerful enough to provide for profound personal changes requires a leap of faith to enter into and considerable time and effort to develop. These are the factors that are currently being limited for many survivors who have turned to therapists to assist them in healing. Rather than an evolving spiral of growth, many people are limited to brief interactions and/or drug therapies. Survivors are being challenged to find creative ways to heal themselves outside the traditional mental health community. Certainly one can heal without interaction with mental health providers. It is, however; a shame that those who turn to the psychiatric/psychological industry for help are finding their choices increasingly limited to treatments that do not provide long term healing.

The past fifteen months have been a time of great personal struggle for me. I have lost six family members and friends to death, and helped several others through serious illnesses. One beloved family member died in my arms. My scarred, but not bloody, arms. As I sat down to write this editorial, I realized that, despite the incredible stresses of the past year, I have not cut, burned, nor bruised myself. I have not even considered doing so. In the midst of profound grief, shock, outrage, and fear, I did not consider SIV. I did not need to. I had not made a promise to anyone, including myself, to avoid SIV. I have always believed that if I need to cut, then I need to cut. Survival always comes first. But I also can attest to the possibility of living without SIV, even in immensely difficult times. One after another, unexpectedly for most, I lost many I loved. My own healing had evolved to a place, however, wherein I did not consider SIV to help me cope with very deep and raw emotions and extremely difficult decisions. Through my own experiences of a healing relationship, by learning empathy, respect for, and trust in myself, I had arrived in this strong and powerful place. Without question, life without SIV is preferable to that with it. It was not controlling SIV that led me to the freedom that I now have, but outgrowing the need for it. I am truly grateful for all the healing relationships I have had, including that with myself, which have brought me to this new place. To say that the journey has been worth the effort is truly an understatement.

VIOLENT SPLENDOR

TODAY I LOOKED IN A MIRROR. NOT JUST A QUICK GLANCE TO FIX MY HAIR BUT A FULL LONG LOOK. WHO IS THIS STRANGER LOOKING OUT AT ME? NO ONE I RECALL AND SHE IS MUCH OLDER THAN I.

HER FACE IS ROUND AND SHE HAS WRINKLES BY HER EYES. THERE IS A DEEP FURROW EMBEDDED IN HER FOREHEAD. YET HER EYES ARE FAMILIAR AND PROJECT A CHILD LIKE QUALITY. AS MY EYES TRAVEL DOWN HER NAKED BODY I AM STRUCK BY THE ROADWAY OF SCARS RUNNING IN ALL DIRECTIONS. AMID THE CHAOS OF LINES LIES A HUMMINGBIRD AND A BUTTERFLY. HER BELLY IS LARGE AND HANGS AS IF TO PROTECT HER MOST INTIMATE PARTS. THE THIGHS ARE SCARRED IN ROWS OF THREES. WHY THREES? HER CALVES ARE LARGE, SHE MUST BE A RUNNER, BUT FROM WHAT?

I STEP BACK TO GET A FULL VIEW. THERE IS SOMETHING IN HER PLUMP ROUNDNESS THAT FEELS HOMEY. YOU KNOW, THAT KIND OF PERSON YOU'D LIKE TO CURL UP IN HER LAP AND LET THE HUGENESS ENVELOP YOU. TO SLEEP THE SLEEP OF A CHILD IN IT'S MOTHER'S ARMS WHILE IN THE DISTANCE HER HEART BEAT KEEPS TIME WITH YOURS.

CLOSE THE WOUNDS, COVER THE SCARS, AND SHE IS ME, IN ALL HER VIOLENT SPLENDOR, SHE IS ME.

PAM

I don't remember when I first started SIV. Sure didn't know what it was called except release. I don't think cutting was the first method I used. I don't know what was, only that if I made myself hurt it was better than when they made me hurt. I remember, in 1990, the first time I took a knife and cut my leg. It seemed like a good thing. I had scars before, but no memory of them getting there. The first time I told a therapist about it he looked at me with disbelief and said, "Well, just stop, right now!" I could tell how shocked he was and I could also tell I was the first person he had met who ever told him something like that. I was lucky. The next time I got the courage to tell him he was prepared. I could tell he had taken the time to research the problem and was a lot more understanding, but still had no idea how to help me. No one has. The best thing they say is "I understand you must be hurting a great deal to do this to yourself." That is the most comfort I've gotten from a professional. And I am grateful for that. I have made it through this Halloween season without a cut. First time in my memory. I am proud but cautious. Nothing is for sure with SIV. Not until all the pain is gone. Not until all the parts have been heard. Not until all the little ones have had their say and have come to know what kindness and real love is. Then maybe I can breathe easier. Maybe then I can feel safe from myself. I've come a long way in the last six years of trying to understand my selves. I don't live in a clouded world any more. I know what I am capable of doing.

Barb E.

Not here
or there
Not anywhere
Nothing inside
or out

Dead or Alive?
Hard
to tell
When myself
hides
Ceases to exist
And no one
is left.
Maybe pain
is
better
than
nothing.

Jan H.

Why We Hurt: Multiples and Self-Inflicted Injury

Our kids were born in torture, so naturally they return to pain to get a grip on things they don't understand. Imagine being created by pain so excruciatingly intense that one person couldn't take it. When consciousness returned to the body, as pain relinquished its hold, another being was there who continued to live pieces of pain and torture, switching in and out with others as they each reached their threshold. These kids didn't know love and caring. The only thing consistent in their small lives was pain, abandonment, torture, and lies.

Imagine, suddenly, 30 years later, you wake up. The pain is no longer there so you search for something familiar. Your eyes rest on a knife. Naturally you want to inflict the pain yourself to alleviate the stress of entering a new environment where caring, instead of torture, is the norm. Cognitive dissonance, I think it's called, is too great and until you can feel the pain of being systematically tortured, raped, and abused, the knife will look real good. Of course it's often reinforced with programming to use the knife or other sharp objects instead of feeling the feelings.

When the feelings do come out, they are intense. The struggle to cry, scream, or sob instead of cut, scratch, bite, or hit is desperately fought by each child who awakens in the adult body. Their fear of showing feelings was etched deeply into their minds because, in their reality, showing feeling was dangerous at best, deadly at worst.

The Treehouse People

Self-inflicted violence has been with me since I was 12 years of age. I'm now 42. People suspect me of self-injury because mine is an obvious one. Besides cutting and scratching my hands, arms, and legs, I've also done my face. I've improved. Most of the scars on the rest of my body have disappeared with time and the scars on my face are fading. This was a 30-year struggle.

I went through junior high, high school, college, and my working career with this problem. When I began looking for work as a young woman, I would never get certain jobs. They never hired me as a sales clerk in department stores, as a perfume sprayer, or as a bank teller. Teaching school, being a nurse or a doctor, chef, are all jobs that are hard to get and achieve at as an obvious self-injurer. I ended up taking tests and receiving such high scores that I was hired into better jobs than the ones mentioned.

I received A's, B's, and C's at school and okay evaluations at work. I feel that if I were not such an obvious self-injurer, that I would have been a straight A and B student, and that I would have been promoted faster at work. Oh, I tried covering myself with makeup the best I could, but I always had to work a little harder than my peers for what I got. Jobs are about people, personality and chemistry.

I know self-inflicted violence is hard for people to understand, but I think there should be some compassion and fairness for those who have the compulsion to do it. Meanwhile, as I've improved over the years, I'll continue my struggle to stop hurting myself.

Grace

Nothing feels so lost and lonely
than to hear my own heart
beating at night,
I sometimes feel myself wish to disintegrate
so i am not seen
memories, more of them haunt me
oh, the craziness of those years
and now have come the tears
I remember when i never cried
now it seems like i'll never stop
will i drown?
I long to be held
someone hold me in this pain
splitting off, fragmenting into tiny shards of glass
if the pain gets too bad, i'll look for the glass
i'm bouncing off walls
trying to act normal, drugged by pretending to be ok.
I exist past the ugliness of the past
that much i've learned
I long for wholeness
God help me.

Karen

Go away
to escape
for peace
to nothing
CUT
and be alive
CUT
and come back
CUT
and
watch the blood
and
FINALLY
feel the pain.

Jan H.

To Debby,

Why, if you say you love me
Do you force me to feel my pain?
Only to choke, and suffocate me
You know I'm shy, I cannot speak
When her hands squeeze my throat
So let me go, and let it flow
If you cut, it won't hurt
It'll feel great, to see it leak
As the pain, feels no more
I start to breathe, as her hands release
For, you do love me, when you cut me
A small child's pain, I feel no more
Debbie

By Debra Mulholland Strom

Dear Little Debbie,

I feel your pain, I feel your rage
I cannot cut you, to release your rage
For to cut you, is to cut me
To hurt you, is to hurt me
Another road, I must find
To let the pain out, so freedom flows
You must wait, very patiently
Have faith in me, you will not choke
I'll release her strangle hold
Only, I'll not do it by cutting
For you're too small, you do not know
You cannot ask to be cut and hurt
To add more pain, as freedom flows
For to cut is also a strangle hold
Then two of us will strangle you
As I promised, I'll find a way
For you and I to free our rage
I love you, I will not fail you
Please hold your rage, 'til help arrives
Debbie

telling

i bleed
i hurt
i curse

i rock
i stone
i hold
all in

i bleed
to let
it out

i purge
the past
i purge myself
of my
secret
of the
slaughter
of my
youth

i bleed
i hurt
it's
old
so
old

i
so
tired

i
sleep
now

{bleed}
s.w.

FILM REVIEW

between the lines: a documentary about cutting. Copyright 1997 by Meta Flicks. Black and white, 16mm. 21 minutes. Produced by Sophie Constantinou, 131 Albion St., #6, San Francisco, CA, 94110 USA. (415) 431-7203. E-mail address: sophc@sirius.com.

It has taken me a long time to understand that art is not a human luxury, but a necessity. This film teaches that lesson quickly and adamantly. A stack of textbooks explaining SIV could not impact a person more than this 21-minute film. **between the lines** serves the purpose of art: to impact the world, to move people to a new place of appreciation, to bring a fresh perspective on some aspect of life.

Although all reviewers have their own personal bias, few write reviews about projects they themselves have participated in. I am in this predicament. However, not to review this film because I have a small role in it would be a disservice. It is important that people become aware of its existence and they can then make up their own minds regarding its impact.

between the lines is a crucial work that transcends the limits that usually constrain the exploration of the topic of self-injury. It is well titled, because commonly the focus is "on the lines" – on the actual wounds. Yet what is most important is what exists "between the lines" – the actual person. The person using SIV is a living, feeling, human being with her own life history as well as motivations and needs. This film brings you some of these people. It is a documentation of their voices and of their wholeness. It is especially refreshing in these times of clinical perspectives and the objectification of people into diagnostic categories.

I raise a toast to Sophie Constantinou for her creation. Years of work have culminated in a production that is already touching and teaching people around the globe. **between the lines** has been shown in several American and Canadian cities, as well as in Europe. I wish that it travels far and wide. I hope that it travels to you.

THE CUTTING EDGE is a forum for women living with Self-Inflicted Violence and our allies. I am interested in your opinions and experiences, and in publishing the work of women who have lived with or are currently living with SIV. Please consider contributing to **THE CUTTING EDGE** in whatever way you can. Poetry, prose, art and opinion statements are welcome. Artwork is limited to that which can be reproduced by photocopying. Please include a written statement with your work giving me permission to publish. Please let me know if and/or how you wish to be identified. All communication is kept strictly confidential, as is the mailing list. Your work is needed, appreciated, and celebrated. The address for **THE CUTTING EDGE** is P.O. Box 20819, Cleveland, Ohio 44120 USA.

The future of **THE CUTTING EDGE** is entirely dependent upon your contributions and donations. I am very grateful for the donations I have received. No one is turned away from receiving this publication because of an inability to pay. If you wish to receive the newsletter, please make a donation of \$10 - \$30 per year. I request that professionals and others with financial resources make donations of at least \$20 - \$30 per year. Also, back issues are available. I request a donation of \$10 - \$20 for the compilation of the first two years of publication as well as the following yearly compilations. In order to avoid high bank fees for processing checks from outside the U.S., I request that international donors send money orders in U.S. dollars. Once again, thank you!

<p>This issue of THE CUTTING EDGE was written in December, 1997 in Cleveland, Ohio. All rights are reserved by Ruta Mazelis, Publisher. Rights of individual contributors are retained by the contributor. The mailing address for all correspondence is: THE CUTTING EDGE, P.O. Box 20819, Cleveland, Ohio 44120 USA. Neither the publisher nor laywoman contributors are engaged in the practice of medicine. Women living with Self-Inflicted Violence may wish to consult competent professionals for help with all treatment strategies.</p>
