
THE CUTTING EDGE

A Newsletter for People Living With Self-Inflicted Violence

Volume 14, Issue 4 (56)

Winter, 2004

It is with a spirit of celebration that I welcome you to this issue of **The Cutting Edge**. As the fourteenth year of publication of this newsletter comes to a close I am excited to announce a change that will begin with the next issue. **The Cutting Edge** has joined with the **Sidran Institute**, of Baltimore, MD in a collaboration that will improve the publication of this newsletter as well as promote greater awareness of Self-Inflicted Violence in other ways. I am delighted by this shift and look forward to introducing you to **Sidran** and Esther Giller, its President and CEO, in the next issue. With this change, the new contact information for **The Cutting Edge** is: *The Cutting Edge, Sidran Institute, 200 East Joppa Road, Suite 207, Baltimore, MD 21286 USA. The new e-mail address is cuttingedge@sidran.org.*

The resource section of this issue contains reviews of two publications that are available to you, at no or minimal cost, on various aspects of SIV. The first, written by Paja Ashanti, is a coloring booklet for mothers to use to help their children understand SIV. The second is a piece I wrote on SIV that is intended for the general public. I am greatly interested in hearing from those of you who choose to receive these writings and ask you to send me your comments. I am currently writing a longer document on SIV and greatly appreciate your thoughts and experiences.

As always, thank you to the contributors to this issue who are sharing a part of their lives with us. Thank you for helping us understand and find compassion for ourselves as well as each other.

SIV: COMPLEX NEEDS, SIMPLE SOLUTION

This editorial is joyfully brief, as it is my attempt to address the concept of Self-Inflicted Violence (SIV) in a simple way. This desire comes from my efforts at writing a longer work on this subject and, while thinking and rewriting repeatedly, realizing that it is as important to have a place where SIV is described briefly as it is to have a longer piece of work exploring its complexities.

SIV is the term used to describe specific behaviors such as, but not limited to, cutting, punching, and burning, directed at one's own body. Other terms used to describe this are "self-mutilation" and "parasuicidal behavior" but these are inaccurate representations. Cutting oneself is often misinterpreted as

a failed, rather pathetic, suicide attempt when in fact it often serves as a coping mechanism that deters the person from suicide. Neither is the intention behind SIV the goal of mutilation of the body. SIV is one of many ways people manage disturbing internal stressors such as intense emotions, and other repercussions of past trauma, such as flashbacks and dissociation.

While people turn to SIV for a wide variety of reasons, and themselves have varied histories and life experiences, there are basic commonalities that weave through all of these differences. The needs people have for self-injury, and the process of healing from them, have basic themes:

- Although often misunderstood and viewed as only pathological, SIV makes sense and serves a purpose in the life of the person who uses it; SIV is a tool for coping with intense stressors, emotions, or situations and, for some, SIV serves as an effective deterrent to suicide.
- The roots of the pain, stress, and circumstances that SIV addresses lie in previous trauma; the repercussions of historical trauma, including but not limited to experiences of childhood abuses, are powerful and do not simply fade with time. SIV is used to manage the repercussions of traumatic experiences.
- Traumatic experiences, though they can wound the person greatly, can be addressed. Growth and healing are possible for the many wounds of trauma. As this occurs, the need for SIV diminishes. People who address the traumatic roots of SIV heal from them and no longer find SIV a necessity in their lives. This is not a linear process and cannot be forced upon someone.

There are many types of SIV, and many more forms of self-injury besides SIV. SIV typically includes the acts of cutting, punching, and/or burning one's body, but people have turned to other forms of SIV to cope with the aftereffects of their specific histories and circumstances. SIV is not a representation of insanity, nor a disease. It is a response to remote traumatic experiences that have left the person with very painful sequelae, such as profound grief, rage, fear, dissociation (the disconnection of one's spirit from one's body), anxiety, mistrust, depression, and more. SIV serves as an effective, though temporary, mediator of these emotions or experiences. The events leading to SIV are intense and reflect the intensity of the trauma the person has historically experienced. Persons living with SIV may not be aware of their traumatic history; sometimes SIV is a way the expression of prior trauma arises.

The most common repercussion of trauma survival is the disconnection a person feels from themselves and the world around them. Trauma changes how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world. The road to healing, therefore, is one of connection. The most frequent comment I hear from people who first receive the newsletter is "I thought I was alone." It is crucial that we realize that we are not alone, nor are we insane. When we can do this, then we can begin to connect with who we are, with our own woundedness and potential, and with the world around us, which can include those who have had similar experiences and therefore may understand our own. The poetry, prose and artwork of people who have contributed their work to this newsletter serve to connect us not only with them, but with aspects of ourselves as well. When we can empathize with another, we can learn compassion for ourselves and vice versa. When we tend to the roots of our pain, we can open our lives to new ways of being that require less "coping" and more actual living. I am often asked "how do people stop self-injuring" when the most useful question is "why do people start/stop self-injuring?" It is up to each of us to discover the roots of our SIV. It is up to each of us to decide what, if anything, we choose to do about SIV and the reasons it exists in our lives. While recognizing that SIV is an emotionally difficult struggle for those who care about us as well as ourselves, we need to acknowledge that healing takes time and energy, and is much more than simply stopping or not stopping a behavior. Healing is a metamorphosis, not an elimination of symptoms.

There are many types of traumatic experiences and few people live lives without some form of trauma. Some of the most profound trauma, however, is child abuse. Unfortunately, child abuse is not rare. It is horrifically prevalent, though it is difficult for many people to remain aware of this. There is an epidemic of child abuse in this country. Many people prefer to believe that there is an epidemic of mental illness instead. Yet many feelings and behaviors often deemed to be symptoms of mental illness are actually the repercussions of trauma. While difficult to acknowledge that this is so, it is crucial to recognize that this

recognition carries with it great hope for all of us. Traumatic aftereffects can be managed, even if they are as intense as multiple personalities or psychosis. We are not a country of people fighting an epidemic of brain biology gone bad. We are a country of people in great pain, much of which is difficult for us to acknowledge, understand, and accept. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that, if abuse is acknowledged by the public, then we can, as a society, work to end it. We can commit to the prevention of further abuse and to the healing of the victims and, potentially, the perpetrators. If we can strive for this, we will be adding a great deal of potential and hope to the future, and healing SIV on the journey as well.

Bruised

When the rain falls
and the sky is bruised
who will make yesterday right
after all the wrongs?
Wrapping the wounds
won't make them go away
You can't heal
my dead heart.
One day – when I'm stripped
of all this pain and shame
all that will be seen
is EMPTINESS
This is all I am
in the rain
Bruised like the night sky
with nothing but
bandaged arms.

Helena

My Journey To Healing

As I thought about what to write here, I wondered what was most important to include. I believe that it could take a book to write about all the highs and lows of my experience. But I was asked to include the ways in which treatment actually hindered my healing process. Here's my attempt to summarize my path.

I first had noticeable emotional problems after I became physically ill. This was shortly after I was divorced. I was 25 years old, and working as an electrical engineer. My first illness was diagnosed as optic neuritis, and I believed there was a possibility that I would become totally blind. As the optic neuritis resolved, I developed side effects of the steroids used to treat the neuritis. My joints were dying from avascular necrosis. I ended up having two hip replacements within 7 months of each other. During this whole time, I tried to work as much as possible, but it was very difficult. The difficulties included physical limitations, pain, being an inconsistent employee (who wants someone on their project who might be out for weeks at a time?), etc. All of this tore at my self-image of a capable professional. I became severely depressed.

I felt suicidal, at first, because I felt useless. I believed that if I weren't working there was no use for me. During the first year that I wasn't working I was in and out of the psychiatric unit for most of it. Finally, my psychiatrist told me that I would either have to be committed to a state hospital or discharged to live with a family member. I was forced to move from Florida to Massachusetts and move in with my mother. At that point I felt that not only was I unable to work, but I was also unable to live independently. Soon after I moved in with my mother I attempted suicide.

After I was released from intensive care I was sent to another psychiatric ward. It was there that I learned about self-injury. I saw that the people who cared about me would have been devastated if my suicide attempt were successful, so I started self-injury as a compromise. What I found out was that self-injury really brought relief to the frustrations and anxiety that I felt. It was a visible reminder to me that I had some control over the crazy situation that I found myself in. I found that cutting myself gave me a feeling of control from emotional and physical pain.

As time wore on I used the self-injury more often. My forms of SIV also changed from relatively benign cuts to more intense methods of self-harm. I found that I kept getting hospitalized, and the hospital became to feel like a safe place for me. But looking back, I believe that I had no independence. The hospital became a revolving door. At one point, I was sent to a hospital that specialized in people with multiple personality disorder and with a history of sexual abuse. I left there with a diagnosis of multiple personality disorder (which I knew I didn't have, but acted as if I did to fit in), convinced that a family member had abused me (I knew it was someone else), and with many more ideas on how to hurt myself. I got many more ideas on how to harm myself from the other women in the unit. It almost felt like a training ground. The crazy part was that much of this information was shared in staff led groups! The psychiatrist insisted on detailed descriptions of the methods we each used to harm ourselves. Sounds a bit voyeuristic, doesn't it? This was the "help" that was offered to me in the hospital

*I was on that part of my path for about 8 years. I was much sicker, as the DSM would have defined me, than when I entered the psychiatric system. Over the years I had had 18 shock treatments and been on so many different medications that I couldn't even begin to count them all. Towards the end of those 8 years, I was still self-injuring, but was also developing other ways of coping. I became involved in a very supportive congregation, had a couple of very supportive friends, and found a volunteer job that I found very rewarding. I had become involved in a self-help group for people involved in SIV where the members realized that self-injury served a purpose for an individual, and it became a place that I could honor my experience as a whole person, not the series of labels that had been placed on me. In the self-help group I learned about other resources besides those offered by professionals, such as *The Cutting Edge*. I became less dependent on the hospital as a place to feel safe because I had other safe places.*

Another year after that, I met a wonderful man. We had a long distance relationship for about a year, which gave me time to accept love without being totally freaked out by it. In 1998 I moved to Ohio. We married each other in 2001.

At the time that I moved I immediately looked for a psychiatrist. I believed that I could not exist without one. I believe that one of my first positive moves was when I decided that he was not good for me and found someone who was. The one that I fired had tried to keep me on medication that I didn't feel was right for me, and refused to help me get off of it. That was empowering!

But the professional who helped me the most was a psychologist who specializes in pain management. She was the first professional that I could talk to who I felt didn't judge me, who understood that SIV served a purpose for me, and who looked at me as a whole person – not a set of symptoms. She not only helped me explore the real trauma (childhood rape) that was keeping me with my self-injury, but she also helped me develop and rely on my own strength for healing. Parenthetically, she also referred me to a caring non-judgmental physician who has also been a source of support.

For me, one of my greatest strengths is my spirituality. I began, with a female Rabbi, to develop a ritual which I felt would cleanse my spirit of the dirtiness that I believed was there. At the time I was feeling especially filthy because of the childhood incest. I worked very hard on a Mikveh (ritual bath) service with both the Rabbi and my therapist. I picked my favorite prayers from tradition, modified some others, and found readings other places. I also wrote some parts of it totally myself. The Rabbi that I was working with also found readings and helped me put it all together.

The actual ritual was remarkable for me. Before one actually immerses in the Mikveh, she must be completely clean physically. For instance, nails must be cleaned, toenails cut, teeth flossed, etc. At the Mikveh with me were the Rabbi, my therapist, and a very dear friend. We read through the service that the Rabbi and I had prepared, sang a bit, and then I immersed in the Mikveh with prayers written according to our tradition. It was warm water which left me feeling so peaceful and wonderful I really don't know how to describe it in words. I felt a bit like I was being reborn. Like I was no longer unclean from all that had happened to me, and all that I had done. I really believed that I had a God-given soul, which before then I felt was dirty.

I completed that ritual right before the Jewish holiday of Passover, which is a holiday of freedom. Now, I celebrate Passover as a holiday of personal freedom also.

I occasionally feel the urge to self-injure when I get extremely stressed. At this point in my life, though, I have found many other ways to find the relief that SIV once functioned for me. I have a loving relationship with my husband, I have a very supportive family, and I have friendships that are absolutely wonderful. I have creative outlets, people who count on me, and a feeling of purpose in my life.

When I look back and try to summarize what worked and what didn't for me during this time, this is what I come up with:

- *Hospitals kept me powerless and dependant*
- *People who were treating me didn't look at me as a whole person, just a set of symptoms*
- *I learned many negative lessons while in the hospital, including what will get the attention of staff*

What worked for me:

- *Being treated with respect*
- *Non-judgmental professionals and friends*
- *Being encouraged to see my strengths, and use those same strengths for good*
- *Having a loving support system*
- *Learning how to put my trauma in perspective, including learning (in my WHOLE self) that it wasn't my fault*

Norma

The Blood War Wasn't Won Today

There is a voice inside my head
And a new slit on my upper arm;
I can't remember doing it before bed
But I went to sleep, knowing I could self harm.

It all started twenty plus years ago
Between nine and twelve years of age;
I can't say to myself whoa
As the blood drips on my last bandage

I wipe the blood up
And clean up the mess I made again today;
Surely this time I could've filled a cup
And I cry one more time in the same way.

I've done this cutting so much
Then after it's done;
And looking at my arm as such
I'm for sure the war I haven't won.

Hoping soon I will one day stop this war
That's raging on, and inside of me;
But thinking of all the sores
That's there because of the abuse from he.

I was between nine and twelve when I first cut
At the present I'm at the age of thirty-two;
But now my arm is full of many big ruts
Oh my, there is blood on my left shoe.

When will the day come
That the war of blood will stop;
And I don't look like the rough bum
In front of the barber shop.

That's the place I learned to make
The best slow fine cut, up;
On my left arm while I take
The blade out of my special little cup.

No one knew in the class
On how hard I've tried to stop;
And that I've even used a piece of glass
From a broken soda pop.

Robbie Taylor

Because I was 14 going on 25; because “why can’t you be like your sister?”; because “I never asked to be born”; because it makes me feel good; because I want to not feel at all; because “you’re too good for that”; because you’re beautiful; because you’re smart; because it made me feel alive; because I don’t care; because with one stick everything goes away; because I want to; because you hurt me; because you make me feel like nothing; because I’m so stupid; because I deserve it; because I want to watch it bleed; because you don’t hurt like I do; because you don’t understand; because it’s so easy to forget; because nobody’s really listening; because I am who I am; because I hurt so much on the inside; because of the constant screaming in my head; because I hate you; because you’re you; because I hate me.

Chrissy

...I have been a cutter since I was 7. Through the years my parents, family, and teachers would yell at me and I didn’t quite get what I did wrong. I still have a scar on my forearm from the time I actually let out the frustration. My mom would notice my bruises, scars, and cuts on my body and ask me what happened. I would tell her I got it from gym class or one of my sisters did it. She would yell at me telling/lecturing me about how I am scarring up my body for life.

Five years ago I lost my dad 2 days before Christmas. Being the youngest of 3 sisters, my dad would always let me do things with him if my sisters kicked me out. I will forever cherish those times. This was the hardest time in my whole life because my dad understood me more than my mom. I was there when the doctors came in and told my mom. That was the time I actually remember not caring how much I bled; I just wanted to know if I was dreaming. I still have the scars on my wrists hidden under the bracelets I never take off.

I also felt the same way when the music world lost a great person, Layne Staley of Alice in Chains, just about 1 year ago. I cried a lot because they were my favorite band growing up. I cut myself so much during that time, I couldn’t feel it. I ended up burning my arms a few times with the knife. I had the chance over the summer to see Jerry Cantrell, the “other half of Alice.” I realized that I have to move on, but not to forget the past.

What I have learned is that I trust no one. My family does not know, along with most of my friends. My two best friends do know because they asked about the scars. They both totally understand me and why I cut. I also learned not to listen to the people who make ignorant comments towards me. It will take some time for me to get over some calling me “DC” or “Daisy Cutter.”

I was hoping to stop cutting before my boyfriend found out. I told him one day on the phone because he kept bugging me. It was hard, but we both know that I want to stop. Every once in a while he will ask me if I have cut. I can’t lie to him, so I tell him. He is still behind me on stopping. Not once did he yell at me or call me names. I love him so much more because of this.

I have discovered that some people actually realize why some injure themselves. They don’t judge that individual on the fact of how that’s the way they handle the pain, frustration, guilt, etc... I have written numerous poems about why I cut, how I feel about it and how I would like it (my life) to end.

For some odd reason still unknown to me, my mom took me to see Pearl Jam for my graduation. It was one of the best, if not THE BEST concert’s I have been to. I had sung to every song they played, especially “Alive.” It’s about how Eddie Vedder, the lead singer, found out that his dad died and never really said

good-bye. I understood him exactly since my dad died unexpectedly. At the end he changed the words and sung "You're still alive" and pointed in my direction. I know he wasn't saying that directly to me, but it was an epiphany. It made me realize that killing myself isn't the way out.

I hope that one day I will not need to cut myself. There are other ways to find out and know that you are actually alive. I know right now that I will never wear shorts, skirts, or dresses because of the numerous cuts and scars on my legs. I also hope one day to have kids. I will not hide this from them because they should know why I am the way I am today. I would also like to see them grow up....

Thank you for helping me realize that I am not the only one who cuts.

Vicky

I can't sleep
because it's still there.
I close my eyes and
reality is going no-where.
I take their pills
to make it stop.
This screaming inside
my head.
Makes me wish I
were dead.
To bury it all away
and forget my past.
Where I am free and
at peace at last.
All the pain and emotions
will be wiped away and disappear.
Just like blood.
Just like a tear.

Chrissy

RESOURCE REVIEW

Healing the Trauma of Abuse: a women's workbook. Written by Mary Ellen Copeland, M.A., M.S. and Maxine Harris, Ph.D. Copyright 2000. Published by New Harbinger Publications, Inc., Oakland, CA. 398 pages.

I am always happy to see books published that can be of great use to people who may not have access to or want mental health services. This is one of those, a wonderful workbook written for women who are survivors of physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse, whether it occurred in childhood or adulthood. The authors not only educate the reader, but facilitate her in beginning recovery from trauma if she so chooses, and doing so in a self-respectful way. Even if you do not choose to do the exercises described in the workbook there is much to be gained from reading it. It is a book that is not meant to be gone through once, but returned to time and again as growth continues.

Healing the Trauma of Abuse is divided into four sections: Empowerment, Trauma Recovery, Creating Life Changes, and Closing Rituals. Each of these contains multiple topics with various exercises and activities that allow the reader to explore her circumstances in regard to the topic. One particular topic, Self-Destructive Behaviors, may be of particular interest to those living with SIV. SIV is included in this section as one of many self-injurious behaviors that people turn to to manage the aftereffects of abuse. It is a relief to see it included in this part as one of many behaviors, and not secluded as something horrid or insane. While not pushing nor demanding that readers stop using self-destructive behaviors, the authors provide guiding questions that help the reader identify the purpose the behavior serves and discover possible alternatives to manage those stressors.

I celebrate the way the impact of abuse is identified in this work, and how healing is approached from the perspective of compassionate empowerment. I believe that this workbook will allow many women to discover and begin to heal from the abuse that they have suffered, abuse that has left them in great pain and potentially needing SIV. This book is a friend, a companion, to help one heal the wounds.

When Mom Hurts (Talking to Kids about SIV). Written by Paja Russell. Available from Paja Russell, 514 South Ivy Street, Medford, OR 97501. Please send four postage stamps to cover postage, and a donation if willing.

Paja Russell has been writing books for children for a long time, and I congratulate her for taking on this very difficult topic to help children comprehend SIV and decrease their fear and confusion about it. Not an easy feat considering how most adults react!

Paja's book has been well reacted to by children and, though intended for the 4-6 year-old age range, it can be used with older children as well. Creatively, this book is intended to be a coloring book, giving the children an activity to do while exploring the topic.

Paja has a very helpful "parents page" that comes with the booklet. It contains suggestions on how to use the book and explains various vocabulary choices to talk to children about – terms such as "hurt" and "abuse" and "scar." I particularly like her introduction, in which she states: "Should we talk to our kids about SIV? Yes. Yes we should. No matter how well hidden the act is and no matter how well the scars concealed, our kids see. They see the bandages, the wounds, the scars, they even see our pain. Their little minds whirl and come up with scary thoughts... Opening the door for conversations on the subject of SIV is to put knowledge in their heads and drive fear/anxiety from their hearts." This book does just that – it opens the door to understanding.

While Paja, at this point, is self-publishing this book and only requesting postage costs, I request that we all support her in publication of this work through our donations and our gratitude. She is helping our children understand something which most of dared not speak out about for so very long. Bravo.

Understanding and Responding to Women Living with Self-Inflicted Violence. Product from the Women, Co-Occurring Disorders and Violence Study. Written by Ruta Mazelis. October, 2003. Available at no cost from Policy Research Associates, 345 Delmar Avenue, Delmar, NY 12054; phone: 518-439-7415; e-mail: CPatterson@prainc.com or wvcc@prainc.com.

This brief work on the topic of SIV was published as part of a federal research project that I worked on which looked at improving services for women survivors of violence and their children. I was grateful to have the opportunity to write this piece on SIV and hope that it might serve to bring information and a bit of understanding to the public on this topic. It is meant for those who live with SIV and anyone else interested in the topic, and I hope that it might be of use to clinicians and other health care providers. I am asking that any of you who choose to request this work let me know your opinions about it and any suggestions you have to offer. Thank you.

The Cutting Edge, published quarterly, is a forum for people living with Self-Inflicted Violence and our allies. I am interested in your opinions and experiences, and in publishing the work of people 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. Please include a written statement with your work giving me permission to publish it. Also, I request that you 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: The Cutting Edge, Sidran Institute, 200 East Joppa Road, Suite 207, Baltimore, MD 21286 USA. A new e-mail address is available at cuttingedge@sidran.org.**

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 per year. Also, back issues are available. In order to avoid high bank fees for processing checks from outside the U.S., I respectfully request that international donors send money orders in U.S. dollars. Once again, thank you!

Ruta Mazelis, Editor

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