

## The Methods and Meaning of Self-Inflicted Violence

A heartfelt thank you to the reader who requested an issue focused on various forms of Self-Inflicted Violence (SIV). Most discussions about self-injury focus on cutting, and many mainstream as well as professional articles do the same. While cutting is a common form of SIV, it is not the only form. There are other methods that people use to cope with their struggles. Different methods serve different purposes, but all are a means of coping with extreme emotional or experiential discomfort.

We all hurt ourselves. Some of us live with SIV, but we all hurt ourselves in some way or another, and we all have our motivations. It is useful to take some time to consider the ways that we “hurt” ourselves and the reasons for our self-harm. Someone who cuts herself to release grief may also take scalding showers to try and rid herself of feelings of body shame (this is not uncommon for people who have survived sexual assault). People who punch walls may

be reacting to feelings of helplessness or rage. Some choose to punch themselves rather than others.

There are many forms of self-injury and all of them can be understood if we explore the purpose each serves and the source of the intense discomfort that precedes it. This issue’s contributions are not limited to cutting, therefore, but focus on various forms of SIV. I hope that they begin the exploration of the many facets of SIV.

I want to dedicate the remainder of this editorial’s space to the writing of Elizabeth Adams, the author of *Understanding the Trauma of Childhood Psycho-Sexual Abuse*, who had kindly sent me this piece several years ago. I am so sorry that it has taken me this long to rediscover her words (I had inadvertently misplaced them in a storage box when I moved), but perhaps this is just the right time to share them. I hope that they touch you as much as they did me.  
—Ruta Mazelis

### Understanding Survivors’ Self-Inflicted Violence

By Elizabeth Adams

From my early childhood years until I was 14 years old, I thought of my life as fragmented, presenting a puzzle, clouded by dark shadows, often spinning out of control. I would have described myself as being splintered, empty, hollow, confused, drained, anxious, crazy, afraid, tormented. And yet everyone around me would have described me as happy and normal. My behavior was unconsciously designed to cloak the truth and protect a dark secret from being discovered.

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Welcome to this, the 65<sup>th</sup> issue of *The Cutting Edge*. As we begin our 17<sup>th</sup> year of publication I am more than pleased to let you know that this issue is filled with many touching and profound words written by people who live with Self-Inflicted Violence (SIV). This issue’s focus is on forms of SIV other than cutting (although cutting is still mentioned). I hope that these contributions touch you in both their pain and their hope, and that this issue provides a sense of community for those who struggle with many forms of SIV. I hope that you are inspired to write your own thoughts and experiences and, as always, to send them to me.

As my intention was to use as many contributions in this issue as I could fit in, I am not including a resource section this time around. However, I am looking forward to highlighting some interesting books and articles in the next issue. I am grateful to all of you who forward articles and ideas about books and other things to review. Please keep your suggestions coming. ©

—Ruta Mazelis, Editor



IF YOU’D PREFER TO RECEIVE THIS NEWSLETTER VIA EMAIL AS A PDF, PLEASE LET US KNOW.

Then I began recovering my memories of being sexually abused by a trusted family friend when I was 10 years old. Over time, as I remembered specific details of the years of terrorization while the violations continued, I started to understand the fracturedness. However, only recently have I come to recognize, understand, and accept the self-inflicted violence that has long been part of my life.

Survivors of sexual abuse can exhibit a wide range of self-punishing behaviors that include the following: eating disorders, promiscuity, attempted suicide, abuse of drugs and/or alcohol, entering and/or enduring destructive relationships, and self-mutilation. Survivors also internally punish themselves through feeling sadness, shame, guilt, self-hatred, anger, rage, and fear. Harboring these feelings contributes to the destruction of self-esteem and the sense of self.

Often survivors cope with the abuse by dissociating, which allows them to forget the abuse. Dissociating techniques can also allow survivors to separate their psyches from their bodies so that can't feel pain.

During childhood, and into adulthood, I displayed the following (often pain-inducing) behaviors:

- twisting, sucking, chewing, pulling hard on my hair;
- picking at scabs until they bled;
- chewing my nails and tearing my cuticles until they bled and became infected;
- digging my fingernails into the palms of my hands;

- clenching my jaw and gritting my teeth;
- biting on my arm so hard it left deep toothmarks;
- sucking on my arm until blood gathered under my skin;
- pinching myself so hard I bruised;
- inserting sharp pins or blades into my flesh.

When the pain finally reached my conscious mind, I felt better because the numbness had disappeared and at last I knew I *could* feel.

In addition, I have waged a life-long weight battle. The *only* time in my life when I was not overweight was a five-year period just before and after my memories began returning. To me, eating is a form of self-punishment, and it is also a way in which I make myself unattractive to men.

Also in adulthood, for many years before my memories began returning, I drank heavily almost every night to make the numbness and emptiness disappear. Now that the memories have returned, I seldom drink alcohol. I am extremely conscious of the need to work on healing myself rather than escaping my reality through the use of alcohol.

In childhood and throughout my adult years, I have used dissociative techniques that allowed me to forget the abuse and to ignore pain. However, recently I have come to understand the toll exacted.

Once, a high school friend wanted me to do some-

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## I Gotta Burn Again

It's been a while since I burned my skin  
but the urge is back and I gotta burn again.  
I'm depressed, full of pain, I need a high.

I gotta burn again.

There's no pain from cigarette's bright red glow.  
I press it to my body and count to ten  
But still,

I gotta burn again.

The more I burn, the more I gotta burn  
Til the bubbles look just right,  
Soft and round and exactly the right height.

I gotta burn again.

Lovingly I stroke the burns  
Making sure each gets their turn.  
I feel good inside, comfort from each burn.

I gotta burn again.

The scars are ugly and hard to explain,  
My loved ones all complain.  
"How can you do that and still be sane?"  
Can't they understand that burning takes away  
the pain?

I gotta burn again.

I promise not to burn,  
I promise to me as well as them,  
I try real hard, with all my might,  
Oh, no! The pain is back,

I gotta burn again.

—Jo

## We Want You to Know...

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In my healing process, I am starting to confront past cult abuse with emotional memories, especially through nightmares which seem mild but leave me feeling violent and suicidal when I get up in the morning and through the day too. This has triggered a resurgence of self-abuse, especially beating.

Working with my therapist helped me see more clearly the little girl I know I am hitting. I have been insisting "It's my body," which means "I have the right," but now when I want to hit myself, I picture those darling, lovable little girls, many of whose pictures I have in frames on shelves, and see their goodness and the emotional pain they are carrying from the many times the mother and others beat them, and I try to comfort them instead and beat a pillow, a stool, the bed, whatever, if I have to express the violence.

—Crystal



## Reader Contributions

You're so stupid!

Can't you do anything right?

You'll never amount to anything.

You make me sick!

The woman slapped her hands  
to the sides of her head trying  
to shut out the voices . . .

I don't care what they did to you.

Can't you see I'm busy?

Get out of my way!

Go away! Get out!

Slowly at first, then faster  
and faster she hits the sides  
of her head with her fists.

Still the voices tormented . . .

You are so stupid!

You're not trying!

You ungrateful, terrible child.

You'll be the death of me yet!

I wish you'd never been born!

Dizzy, she slid her body down  
the wall until she sat on the floor.  
Slowly, rhythmically she banged her  
head against the wall—faster and  
faster. She drowned out the voices.

The woman burst into tears. When  
the sobbing ceased, she became  
aware of a painful throbbing  
on her forehead. Gingerly  
she touched the spot . . . and  
winced. She felt the bruise  
spreading. Tomorrow she'd  
wear her hair in bangs

—DoronTheos

It took me a long time to realize the things I did to myself were self-inflicted violence. I didn't think about when I hit and punched myself, cut my skin, bruised my body, starved myself and made myself vomit. It was just something I did since I was 13 years old.

About five years ago I started therapy because my bulimia was out of control and I wanted it to stop. For the first twelve months I saw my therapist every week and barely said a word—talking was not my way of communicating. The only way I knew to say I was in pain was to hurt myself, but I didn't know that's what I needed to say or that's what I felt. I believed I was a mad woman, and I felt too tired and old to deal with yesterday or today. I was wanting to die and several times I tried

to end my life. It obviously didn't work, and I can now say I'm glad I didn't die. I'm learning to talk and trust and experience emotions, and rarely do I need SIV.

I can see why I practiced SIV and that for me it was a survival tool and a way of coping with unbearable things that were done to me. I have had cosmetic surgery on some of my scars as they hadn't healed well and were very noticeable. I didn't do it because I felt shame from my self-injury or to try to forget, because I'm not ashamed to have survived and will never forget SIV and why I did it. I did it as a loving gift to myself and as a symbol of moving away from the need to self-injure.

—Tanya

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thing and I declined. She grabbed my wrists and dug her long fingernails into my flesh. I refused to give in, and didn't feel the pain until her nails had gouged deep into my skin. I still bear the scars on one wrist.

In adulthood, my dissociative skills prevented me from experiencing the pain of headaches, backaches, and pain in my neck and shoulders. I wouldn't become aware of the pain until someone observed that I was rubbing the hurting part of my body and asked what was wrong. My dissociative skills also prevented me from experiencing the symptoms of illness, thus they were not treated in the early stages and escalated into more serious illnesses. Colds quickly turned into sore throats, ear infections, and bronchitis bordering on pneumonia.

My inability to consciously feel pain in my stomach and side resulted in my changing the eating habits and exercise routine that had allowed me to gain control over my body for five years. Over time, I eliminated foods from my diet without realizing I was doing so. The medical problem continued to worsen until I finally recognized it when I began having excruciating painful attacks late at night that involved hours of vomiting. I sought medical assistance the moment I realized there was a problem. However, it was too late for any intervention but surgery. My surgeon commented that I had to have been in terrible pain for at least two years before seeking help. An earlier diagnosis would have allowed me to take corrective measures to alleviate the problem.

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Before survivors can accept themselves and their history of sexual abuse, they must face two challenges—discarding re-

sponsibility for the abuse and releasing the abuse. Recovery and healing cannot begin until they attain these goals. As survivors move toward recovery, they begin to understand the aftermath of sexual abuse; this involves coming face to face with their self-inflicted violence. When this occurs, they experience a different kind of self-blame and feel a different type of shame. Again, they believe they are responsible.

Working through this new humiliation carries the challenge of dealing with others' lack of understanding. If survivors attempt suicide, other people are horrified. If survivors abuse drugs or become prostitutes, others reject them. If survivors insert pins or blades into their bodies, others are disgusted. After all, these acts are carried out by the survivors' hands. Feeling the rejection and revulsion of others increases survivors' sense of self-repulsion. However, survivors must come to understand that these acts of self-inflicted violence are directly related to their history of abuse. These acts can either be part of the coping techniques or result from implementing them.

As I have moved toward recovery and healing, I have learned to accept myself as I am. I now know that everything I have done after the initial incident of sexual abuse, whether consciously or unconsciously, ensured my survival. Armed with that knowledge, I have learned to embrace myself. Through feeling the acceptance and caring of carefully selected family and friends, I am learning that I am worthy of receiving others' love. That lesson is one every survivor deserves to master! ☺

(Elizabeth Adams is the pen name of a survivor who is a university employee and freelance writer.)

I slowly close the  
outstretched fingers  
into a tightly  
clenched fist

I draw deep strong  
breaths, increasing  
my adrenaline to  
make me strong.

I outstretch my  
arms for good  
momentum.

I bring my clenched  
fists to my head,  
beating, beating  
like he used to.

Ha ha I beat you  
to me. I got here  
first. I do the  
job just as well

I beat until I lose  
strength.

I beat furiously  
until the temples swell  
and the fists are bruised

Why don't I cut?

Oh no, not I.

Everyone including myself  
could see the evidence of cuts.

I'm much too clever  
to leave evidence.

The hits to the head don't show  
just like his didn't.

Ah, the secret is still safe.

—M.



## Reader Contributions

I have been reading *The Cutting Edge* and am thrilled each time I receive a copy. With each issue, I hope to see my particular form of self-injury addressed, but it has never been mentioned. Because of this, I feel as if I don't even fit into the "normal" SIV profile. I can connect with the issues you write about, because my SIV serves the same purpose as everyone else's, but I feel alone because I never read about what I do.

When I was little, I was abused with enemas. Although people don't talk much about that, I do finally know other people who were hurt in this manner. What happened to me, though, is that following each enema I got my mother's undivided attention for however long it took me to finish in the bathroom.

Since that was the only time she ever paid attention to me, I learned to "pretend" I had a stomach-ache so I could get her to give me an enema and spend time with me.

As an adult, I replicate the abuse that was done to me as a child. I hurt myself with enemas, and I've learned to do it so as to maximize the pain. I also have several other "normal" ways in which I hurt myself, so I can talk about self-injury in my therapy groups without feeling quite so weird.

I have a lot of shame about actually asking for abuse as a child, and about the way in which I hurt myself. Because of that shame, I can't sign my name to this letter. . . .

—Shame-Filled Reader

### My Birthday Suit

My birthday suit came without instructions  
There was no label "For care see reverse"  
The people I asked didn't teach me a lot  
Most of their lessons were cold or perverse

My suit, over time, got soiled and worn  
And it started to feel real ugly too  
I asked around and no one could help me  
But everyone else seemed to know what to do

The more dirt I went through,  
the worse my suit got  
Until I was shrinking in puddles of pain  
I tried hard to iron out some of the wrinkles  
Then even more people called me insane

My suit began weeping from places I scorched it  
The blisters held tears gently under the skin  
My suit cried for me where no one could see it  
And slowly let go of the pain it held in

If I learned proper care, from the very beginning  
I may not have found how to "iron things out"  
But I didn't, so now I'm trying to relearn things  
And finally I found someone to ask when in doubt

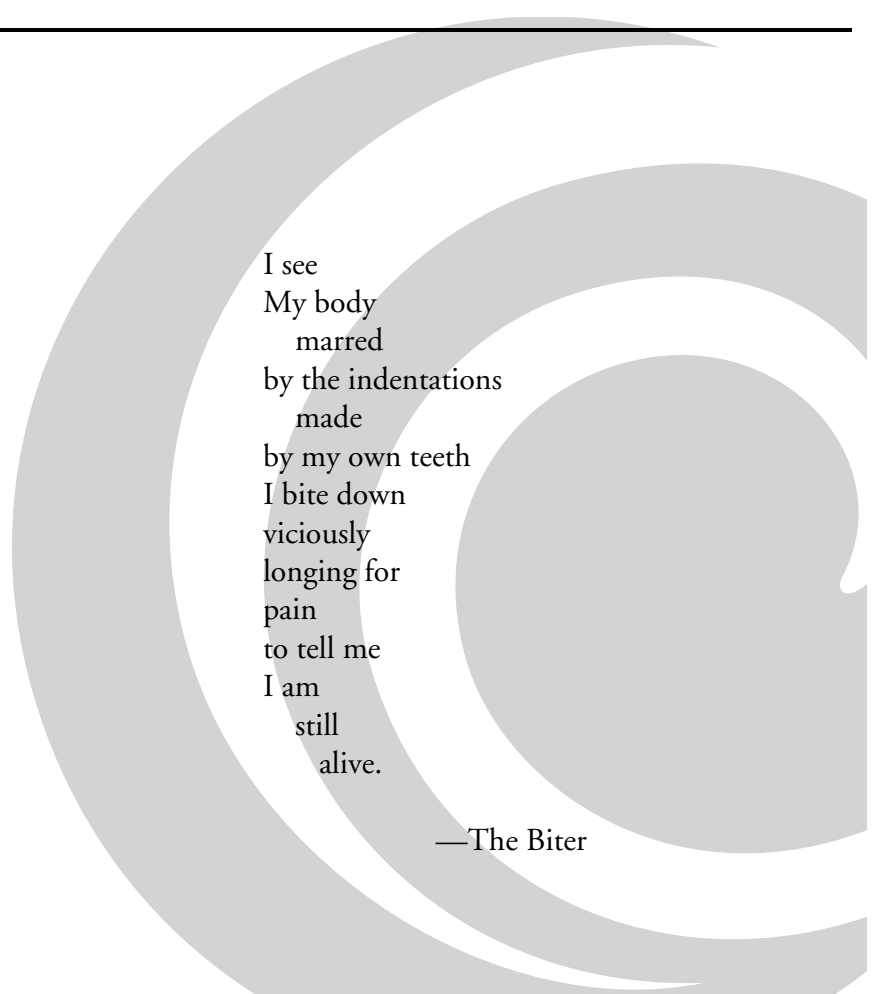
I wonder why clothes that are less important  
Come complete with tags for their care  
And my suit came with nothing, not a single  
instruction  
Not even a warning "Of iron beware"

—LJP

### Scars But Healing

The scars on my body  
show the war that I have  
fought against myself.  
The lines, engravings,  
burns and sores. All show  
the pain that I have felt  
within. As I see my torn  
apart body, I begin to  
look inside at my heart,  
so gentle, so sensitive. So  
"Together." Out of all I have  
suffered, my hand never  
reached my heart. I know  
now that I can mend  
from outside to within.

—Claudia S.



I see  
My body  
marred  
by the indentations  
made  
by my own teeth  
I bite down  
viciously  
longing for  
pain  
to tell me  
I am  
still  
alive.

—The Biter

Hi! I'm Jodi. I too hurt myself. I try to break my hand by punching the wall or pounding it on the edge of the coffee table. I can remember when I was a little girl holding a fork over my wrist in a stabbing manner. I never did it, but it happens when I get angry, upset, or for no known reason at all. . . . One time I went to an emergency room to talk to a psychiatrist and ended up spending four days in the hospital's psych ward. I don't really know why I hurt myself, but I'd rather feel physical pain because I know it's going to go away . . . sometimes I lie to the doctors as to how I hurt myself.

Reading "The Cutting Edge" helped me realize that I'm not alone. As a child I put up and "learned" from my father as to how to deal with anger. His way was by violence. So, I "learned" that if I get angry I must break something too. I know it's wrong and I'm trying alternative methods of venting my anger. My apartment counselor suggested writing in a journal and talking into a tape recorder to record my thoughts and feelings, and allowing her or my therapist to hear or read what I had to say. I hope someday that living with SIV will become a thing of the past, but for now it's a day-to-day thing.

—Jodi