
BOOK REVIEWS



WOMEN LIVING WITH SELF-INJURY. Jane Wegscheider Hyman. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1999.

Women Living with Self-Injury grew partly out of the author's dissertation and explores experiences of and reasons for self-injurious behavior through interviews with fifteen women. The women range in age from **25** to **51** and include graduate students, social **workers**, a typist, an office manager, a technology manager, a physical therapist, and others. All are Caucasian Americans of European descent and were recruited through newspaper advertisements, word of mouth and posted fliers. On average the women had been engaging in some form of self-injury for 13 years. The interviews were transcribed and make up the bulk of the almost 200 pages. Three of the chapters are devoted to one woman's story each (Meredith, Helena and Sarah O.). Other chapters are on subjects such as "From Childhood Abuse to Adult Behavior," "Self-Injuring Women at the Workplace," and "Life with Lovers, Family and Friends," and two chapters address help and recovery.

The author, Jane Hyman, is a noted writer on women's health, and a masterful interviewer. The reader is drawn into the lives and emotions of her subjects. They reveal themselves often to feel helpless in their almost compulsive need to injure themselves. The **book** presents the women with compassion, **yet** is stark in its delivery. This is both the power of the book and perhaps a drawback. It is not meant to be a scholarly work; there are no control subjects, tables of data, statistical analyses. Instead it is meant to explore in depth the reasons, experiences, emotions, reflections, and lives **of** the woman informants—from their world, not from the author's. In this light it is highly successful, perhaps even too successful. The powerful words and construction of the book draw the reader into the lives of these women. We cannot help but feel the pain, the

shame, the isolation and the guilt that they feel. It is not an easy hook to read for extended periods.

The author's commentary on her informants' interviews **brings** unity and coherence to the hook, yet without so much "analysis" that it detracts from the power of the women's own words. Her interpretations are more limited to understanding the behavior and feelings in context rather than concerning intrapsychic mechanisms. **While** there is certainly discussion of the role of abuse in the woman's past, and the development of dissociative symptoms and identities for some of the women interviewed, Hyman remains largely in the background and allows the women to give eloquent voice to their usually silent suffering. **In** addition, the women speak of the benefits of their self-injury, the release from hound emotions, and the relief that comes from nowhere else. It is **striking that most of the women are conflicted** about giving up their behavior and few have stopped for a significant length of time.

Viewed as a hook for therapists working with women who self injure, *Women Living with Self-Injury* presents familiar stories of the etiology (trauma, abuse, neglect, attachment problems, etc.), the addictive qualities of the cycle of self-injury, and for some, the triumphs over its hold. It is a hit of bringing one's work with you when you read this book. but it is hard to keep a "professional distance." **As** with our patients, countertransference experiences can be profound, from denial and minimizing to secondary traumatization by the graphic details offered by some of the interviewees. Don't bring this hook on vacation or read it in bed. Having worked with self-injuring people (including men), I was still captivated and repulsed as though this were the first time I was hearing such stories. Perhaps this was one of the author's intentions, to help us understand our patients from the inside out—to experience some of what they experience without the overt scars.

The women also speak of their experiences with therapists, of what was helpful, of what was well meaning but without understanding, and of what was harmful. Therapists who are new to the field or those who hold self-injury to be unsuccessful suicide attempts or "attention-seeking" manipulations would be well advised to read this hook, as would those emergency room physicians who react with anger and revulsion, rather than with much needed compassion and understanding. The last two chapters also offer some "self-help" techniques as well as stories of hope and recovery.

I would probably not share this book with my self-injuring patients, although I would be tempted to suggest it to significant others in their lives. While the overall hope that is communicated, even within the stories of despair, may be beneficial, I would still worry that the liveliness of this hook might be too triggering.

Overall, while I cannot say that I “liked” the book, I feel that it is well worth the read.

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