

Women Living with Self-Injury

By Jane Wegscheider Hyman, Ph.D.

Reviewed by Faedra Lazar Weiss, M.A.H.L.

1999. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
ISBN: 1-56639-720-0 (cloth); 1-56639-721-9 (paper)

Most people have purposely injured themselves at some time in their lives. Think of the irresistible impulse to run one's tongue over a cold sore or slamming a fist into a wall in frustration or anger. Most people would feel relief when the sore healed or decide that skinning and bruising their knuckles once was enough. However, for some individuals, injuring themselves becomes a sort of addiction. They depend on repeated and often escalating self-injury to function relatively normally in the larger world.

Little research has been conducted on self-injury. In a culture in which most personal predilections and failings are discussed openly, people who self-injure often go to great lengths to hide their behavior and its consequences. Dr. Hyman brings us into the experiences of fifteen women willing to talk about "the last secret" — cutting, burning or battering their own bodies. All of the women included in this volume are European American, in their mid-20's to early 50's and work outside of the home. Several are also students. Some have children; some do not. Some are lesbian, some straight, and some cannot imagine voluntarily participating in any sexual relationship. The author presents their stories in their own words, some at length, others in shorter vignettes. Her analysis shows the common threads and also the uncommon ones.

One thread running through all fifteen stories is child abuse. Every woman telling her story lived through severe sexual and/or physical abuse perpetrated by one or more people she should have been able to trust above all others (almost always parents or other close relatives). A related thread is difficulty in expressing anger. Even in dreams and fantasies, these women rarely can imagine confronting their abusers, let alone harming them in return. Instead, they harm themselves.

Another common thread is secrecy. A few of the women have been able to reveal their physical and emotional scars to a few chosen people, but most fear repercussions at home or at work, and with good reason. Women with children do not want to frighten them or to inadvertently encourage their children to injure themselves. Some partners refuse to tolerate self-injury; others believe they should be able to change a partner's behavior. The women who work as counselors or social workers agonize over whether to confront colleagues who make fun of "cutters" or who treat all self-injury as if it were an active suicide attempt. Women in other jobs fear that colleagues will be disgusted by their actions or will decide for them whether or not to intervene in a situation that invites self-injury.

Perhaps the greatest service of this volume is showing that each woman injures herself for different reasons and similarly needs and deserves unique support in moderating her self-injury or

stopping it altogether. Dr. Hyman compiles 25 reasons that the women she interviewed gave for injuring themselves, some of them seemingly contradictory: to escape reality or to bring oneself back into reality; to punish themselves or to cry for help. Some of the women found a contract with a therapist or important friend not to self-injure helpful in fighting the need to self-injure; others found it insulting. Some preferred that friends or family acknowledge new injuries; some needed reassurance that others would act as if nothing had happened. Some benefited from support groups including other women who self-injured; others preferred more generic support groups, and one woman concluded that the only way she could stop self-injuring was to rely on herself alone. A resource list includes the wide variety of resources that one or more women found helpful.

Women Living with Self-Injury is written in plain language and will be of use to many audiences. Women who self-injure,

Perhaps the greatest service of this volume is showing that each woman injures herself for different reasons and similarly needs and deserves unique support.

their families, friends, colleagues, and lay and professional counselors will find insights and resources. As Dr. Hyman properly notes, this book should be approached with caution: Readers may need to skip graphic descriptions of self-

injury and child abuse or to limit the amount they read at a sitting. Women who have lived with these realities may reawaken painful memories or feel the need to injure themselves as they read the experiences of others. They may want to read this volume, if at all, with a trusted friend or counselor.

This book is not the last word on self-injury. The term "self-injury" itself is chosen from among inadequate alternatives. Dr. Hyman notes areas that deserve much more research: the stories of women of color, and men, who self-injure; the similarities, differences, and overlaps between self-injury and forms of body decoration such as tattooing, branding, piercing, and scarification; and religious traditions that support or encourage afflicting or injuring one's body, as well as further research among European American women. One hopes to see some of these areas addressed in works of this caliber by Dr. Hyman or colleagues inspired by her research. ~

The author, Jane Wegscheider Hyman, Ph.D., is a researcher and writer on mental and physical health, specializing in mental health problems that primarily afflict women. Her other works include *The Light Book* and, with others, *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love*; *Ourselves, Growing Older*; and *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

The reviewer, Faedra Lazar Weiss, M.A.H.L., is Research Associate at the Girls Incorporated National Resource Center. She is co-author of "Prevention of Sexual Intercourse for Teen Women Aged 12 to 14" (*The Prevention Researcher*, 1997, Vol. 4(1), pp.10-12) and of numerous publications on issues affecting the lives of girls and young women. She is a member of the editorial board of *The Prevention Researcher*.