



Hope and Healing for Kids Who Cut: Learning to Understand and Help Those Who Self-Injure

Copyright 2008 by Marv Penner

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WELCOME TO A WORLD OF HURT

CHAPTER 1

“Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ’s law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.”

Galatians 6:2-3, *The Message*

Later this afternoon I’ll be sitting down to what I know will be another deep and painful conversation with Kelly. She’s 16 and describes her life as “totally screwed right now.” My sense is that she’s probably right. The text message I got from her late last night said it all:

i cut agin tonite sorry i tried not 2 can u plz help plz dont give up on me.

I picture my little friend alone in her room, sitting cross-legged on her bed, dressed in a T-shirt and sweats, surrounded by wads of toilet paper that have absorbed her bright red tear

drops...again. I try to imagine what might have triggered last night's episode. It could have been her dad arriving home puking-drunk, leaving her the ugly job of cleaning up his mess and tucking him into bed...again. Or maybe it was her failure to fend off an unwanted sexual advance from one of the nameless stragglers who regularly flop at her house...again. Or it may have just been her inability to manage the familiar flood of pain she felt as she closed her bedroom door to the chaos of what is supposed to be her home...again.

But what triggered the cutting this time really doesn't matter now. The fact is that she has found strange comfort in the lonely ritual that has become part of her life. And I'm afraid the grip of her destructive habit has tightened by one more notch...again.

Sadly, Kelly is just one of millions of young women and men who are involved in what seems at first to be a bizarre behavior pattern with no logical explanation. These are kids who intentionally hurt themselves with sharp blades, broken glass, burning cigarettes, blunt objects, nails, needles, hairbrushes, acid, boiling water, and even their own fists as a way of expressing or managing the intense emotions that chaotically swirl around inside them. Many of them live in broken, messy situations as Kelly does, but others come from families that appear stable with no visible signs of dysfunction.

I've been meeting with Kelly pretty consistently for six months now. In spite of her sincere desire to stop her self-destructive behaviors, these relapses seem to be an inevitable part of the journey. As I think about seeing her in my office again today, my own feelings of inadequacy loom large. I've known dozens of teenagers like Kelly who hurt themselves as the default response when life starts feeling out of control. But even with that kind of familiarity with the topic, I often find myself feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the stories I hear and the depth of the pain those stories represent. Walking with kids who self-injure can be a lonely, difficult, and thankless job.

Kelly's home situation, quite frankly, is a complete disaster. Unfortunately, I'm not in a position to change that. When she asks me if it's okay for her to wish she "had a family," I can only sadly say "yes." When she wonders aloud why God doesn't rescue her from the mess, my theologically correct answers sound hollow—even to me. But when she says, "*plz don't give up on me,*" I realize she's not asking me for advice or theological insight. She's simply asking for my presence. That's something I can offer her.

AM I TALKING TO YOU?

If you are someone who self-injures and you are reading this book, you may be tempted to compare the details of your story with the stories that appear here. Undoubtedly, you will find some common ground with the kids whose stories appear throughout these pages. But I want to encourage you to be very cautious about two tendencies I've often seen. The first is to belittle your story because it's not nearly as bad as someone else's. Your story is significant, and your pain is real. Don't put yourself down because you feel like you're overreacting to a situation that's not as bad as it could be. The other tendency is to justify your self-injury because your story is a lot worse than some of those you'll read about here. The fact that you've picked this book up tells me you long for the hope and healing the title promises. Read on, open your heart to the healing that God wants to offer you, and find courage in the fact that you are not alone.

It's a Bigger Problem Than We Realize

The issue of self-injury has become increasingly visible in the world of adolescents and young adults in recent years. Profiled on daytime talk shows, celebrated on countless Web sites where cutters can post their painful poetry and pictures, sung about in pop songs, written into the plots of movies and music videos, revealed as part of the secret world of celebrities...self-injury is

going mainstream, and is likely to remain part of the cultural landscape for the foreseeable future. We can no longer pretend this is a fringe issue that occurs only in the most extreme cases. It's an unusual teenager who doesn't know a self-injurer or two. School counselors, athletic coaches, church youth workers, EMTs, probation officers...anyone who works with kids will tell us it's happening all around us, and we can't pretend it's not.

There seems to be solid evidence that the problem of self-injury is not merely becoming more visible but actually becoming more prevalent. In 1998 Steven Levenkron wrote *Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-Mutilation*, one of the first books addressing the issue of self-injury. Levenkron was seeking to introduce the world to a phenomenon he believed was beginning to become part of North American youth culture. A highly credible expert in the field, Levenkron had clearly done his homework. His book remains a standard text in the understanding of self-injury. In the preamble to his book, Levenkron estimated that self-injury was an issue for about one in every 250 teenage girls—just over one-half of one percent. His book suggests that self-injury was not an issue for guys at the time. There's no reason to believe Levenkron's estimates were inaccurate. As shocking as the behavior itself was, the statistics really didn't cause many people to stop and take notice.

However, in the first few years of the twenty-first century, there was a haunting sense among those of us who worked closely with teenagers that the numbers were growing. We didn't really have statistical support for this sense that self-injury was quickly becoming a much more significant problem until Princeton and Cornell Universities published the findings of a major study done among their student bodies in 2006. Their study of more than 3,000 college students showed that approximately 17 percent (one in five girls, and one in seven guys) had self-injured at some point in their young lives. This represents

an increase of epidemic proportions from the number Levenkron reported just 10 years earlier.

Furthermore, the 2006 study indicated (to no one's surprise) that most of the people who said they had hurt themselves had done so secretly. Their behavior was a carefully guarded secret that no one knew about. It seems that most self-injury is done very privately and stays conveniently concealed under long-sleeved shirts, camouflaged behind a jumble of bracelets and bangles, or hidden away on a teenager's thigh or tummy. Obviously, this means that when we hear numbers from school counselors, youth pastors, or others who work directly with students, we can safely assume the self-injuring kids they know represent only the tip of the iceberg. For every cutter who is identified, it's likely there are several others who are suffering alone without anyone to offer support, encouragement, and understanding.

A HINT FOR HELPERS

When we read statistics like this, it's easy to assume every kid we know is a potential self-injurer. I want to caution you not to be paranoid but to be intentionally observant. Paranoia strips much of the joy from this delightful ministry we have of working with teenagers. Let kids know you're comfortable talking about tough topics, communicate compassion in all you do, and help them realize you're not perfect. You'll find you have plenty of opportunities to talk to kids about the hurt in their lives, whether they are self-injuring or not.

Sometimes the Family Looks Pretty Good

Unfortunately, family circumstances and external appearances aren't always good indicators of whether someone is a self-injurer. While many self-injurers have chaotic family situations, there are other kids I know whose families and life circumstances seem stable and positive, yet they turn to self-harm as a

way of dealing with something that's going on inside. The chaos of divorce, poverty, substance abuse, and mental illness that defined Kelly's environment made her self-destructive choices at least somewhat understandable. But what about those kids who come from homes that appear to be healthy and functional, yet still turn to self-harm as a way of coping?

Meet Andy, an athletic, handsome 17-year-old who is at the top of his class academically and maintains an active social life amidst all his scholastic and sports activities. When you first look at this guy, you'd never guess that over the last four years he has been regularly cutting, burning, and bruising his own body without anyone finding out. Andy came to see me only after the coach of his basketball team saw bloodstains on a T-shirt, asked some questions, and insisted that Andy needed help. As his story unfolded, I found out Andy's dad is a successful businessman with a high profile in the community. Andy's father is a "self-made man" who had nothing when he migrated to North America in his early 20s. Hard work and perseverance made him the success he is today. Andy's mom is a bubbly, outgoing socialite who volunteers at the church and in the school. They live in an upscale suburb where success is measured by the size of your backyard pool. What would cause a guy living in that kind of fairy-tale environment to hurt himself like Andy does? Perhaps this journal entry will give us a bit of a clue:

I'll never be good enough—not sure why I even bother trying. Can't handle feeling like a loser every day. I'm not sure I deserve to be in this family of amazing people. Maybe if he'd just show up to one of my games sometime he could be happy with me. Screw it—It'll never happen. Who am I tryin to kid?

Choose Your Pain

For most kids who self-injure, it comes down to managing chronic and overwhelming *emotional pain* through the use of

self-inflicted, short-term *physical pain*. The “logic” is that physical pain can be controlled while relational pain cannot. The level of cognitive distortion behind this thinking may seem obvious to others on the outside. But for the young person whose emotions have reached a breaking point, self-injury is a reasonable solution to what has, in their mind, become an intolerable situation. Listen to how 16-year-old Britney describes the thinking process:

With each swipe of the blade or every prick of a pin I feel my pain slowly slip away, although I know it will soon return. For one moment I feel an indescribable pain pour out from deep inside. I feel all my anger and frustrations pulling away from me, escaping me. For that moment, I'm free.

AM I TALKING TO YOU?

As someone who self-injures, you may read these quotes and find they make complete sense to you. One thing I am praying you will discover as you read on is that much of the thinking that lies beneath your choice to hurt yourself is distorted and inaccurate. Take a moment right now to ask yourself how you justify your self-injury, and be open to the possibility your logic may be flawed.

To the casual observer, cutting may appear to be an act of self-destruction, but many who are caught in the cycle sincerely believe it is about self-preservation. The intensity of emotion many kids describe may simply not be visible—even to people who are most connected to them. Adrian, a 17-year-old high school junior, is obviously committed to protecting the people closest to him from the pain he is so familiar with:

I am full of anger and hurt. I feel like nobody cares. I do it because it is easier for me to hurt myself and deal with my

pain than it is to tell someone and hurt their feelings. I would rather be the one hurting. I never want to make someone feel the way people make me feel, so I don't say anything. I keep everything to myself and then it builds up. I explode and then I start cutting. It's the only way I know to make it go away.

Anger, hurt, sadness, despair, fear, loneliness, and self-hatred are just some of the feelings that lie beneath these destructive choices. These emotions are often stuffed and denied—expressing them would represent a risk the self-injurer may not be willing or able to take. In homes where emotional honesty is not valued, these deeply negative feelings can fester below the surface and intensify gradually to the point where they must be vented somehow. When healthy patterns of thought and emotional expression haven't been learned, kids may think they have no choice but to handle their feelings in their own self-destructive ways. Listen to how 18-year-old Jasmine describes the process:

I do it to stop thinking. The blood, the cutting, gives me something else to look at and concentrate on. If I stop then the feelings I'm trying to block out come back. If I do it for long enough then when I'm done that is what I think about. Or the time has passed until I can do something else. In our household we have to be brave. Crying is not allowed. My father has a very short temper and if you make noise that will annoy him like crying he gets mad. I'm not incapable of crying I just can't. For my sake, it's best that I don't. I do it to stop thinking so that I have something else to occupy my mind in times of pain. I cry through the blood; my body cries for me.

Imagine the loneliness of someone who feels she can only process her sadness by creating tears of her own blood. Add to

that the feeling of personal shame that comes with knowing that her actions are harmful, addicting, and probably self-defeating. The pain is further complicated by the realization that, if people find out about what she's doing, they are likely to pull away from her relationally because of the fear her behaviors produce. To be honest, I haven't met many people who feel as alone in this world as kids who cut.

A HINT FOR HELPERS

One question you may find yourself asking is: "Should I confront a teenager I have reason to believe may be self-injuring?" Obviously, there's no simple answer, because each situation is unique. The determining factor may be the quality of your relationship with that young person. In a relationship that's based on mutual trust and respect, you already have the kind of rapport that allows you to broach topics like this. Be gentle, asking instead of accusing, and assure your young friend that your question is based in concern not judgment.

Few people have thought through an appropriate response to the discovery that someone they know and love is caught up in this painful cycle. The first time a youth worker, teacher, or coach catches a glimpse of a freshly cut arm is often a terrifying experience that leads to lots of questions. "Should I ask about it?" "Am I the only one who knows?" "What if I say the wrong thing?" And if that feels scary, imagine the fear of parents who suddenly discover their child is involved in self-injury. Many moms and dads who find themselves in this position report feeling terrified, numb, shamefully responsible, and ultimately paralyzed. The helplessness they experience often makes them feel like victims as well. Knee-jerk overreactions can be relationally harmful and are rarely effective—the last thing these kids need is for someone to frantically tell them that they really ought to stop doing it. But ignoring the evidence is probably worse.

So what can we do? How do we point these kids to the hope and healing we long for them to experience? It should be apparent that we must not belittle the reality of these kids' circumstances or the depth of their pain. Healing will never be achieved through our reciting pat answers and spiritual-sounding clichés. There is no room for condescending judgment or morbid curiosity.

The only way to participate in the healing journey of a young person who is self-injuring is to enter their pain through deep listening, chosen empathy, and the declared willingness to live in the mess with them. That's something most of us can't do on our own.

We Have a Great Role Model

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah spoke of God's anointed deliverer who would bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom for captives, and offer release from darkness for prisoners and comfort to all those who grieve and mourn (Isaiah 61:1-3). About 700 years later, Jesus read these words during a Sabbath synagogue service to announce to his generation that this ancient prophecy would be lived out in his life (Luke 4:14-21). These vivid words—*brokenhearted*, *captive*, *prisoner*, *grieving*—describe the world of most of the self-injurers I've known. Many are brokenhearted and grieving. They feel imprisoned in a desperate situation, sensing it can never be any different—that they will always be vulnerable to slipping into these familiar but destructive patterns of coping. It's a rare self-injurer who doesn't sincerely want to stop. But they truly believe that if they were to stop the behavior their lives would quickly spin even more out of control and they'd be left with no way of managing the personal chaos they feel. That's what I call being held captive.

What does this Old Testament prophecy about Jesus have to do with our role in the lives of these deeply hurting kids thousands of years later? If the passage refers only to Jesus' ministry,

it really has nothing to say to us. But in 2 Corinthians 5:19-20 Paul reminds us that Christ has now entrusted to us the ministry that he began:

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.

This passage clearly identifies us as Christ's ambassadors, inviting us to speak on his behalf, calling people to a reconciled relationship with him. God's desire is that we would share Christ's heart for the misunderstood, the disenfranchised, the lonely, and the alienated. When we see deeply hurting people through Christ's eyes and listen to them through Christ's ears, we are in a position to respond to them with the firm gentleness and deep compassion of Christ.

An Overview of the Journey

Since effective intervention has to begin with accurate understanding, that's where we'll need to start. We'll take the time to explore what self-injury is...and what it's not. We'll discover why kids turn to self-harm and the reasons they give for being unable (or unwilling) to stop. Because of the potentially addictive nature of self-injuring behavior, it will be important for us to think through the cycle of addiction and the relationship between self-injury and other addictive behaviors. Once we have a clear understanding of what causes kids to harm themselves, we'll consider how we can help.

As you already know, this is a painful and difficult topic. But I know you wouldn't be holding this book if you didn't want to be part of the solution for someone you care about deeply. Counselor and author Robert Veninga calls each of us to consider the importance of the role we play in the lives of kids in pain. In *A Gift of Hope: How We Survive Our Tragedies*, Veninga makes

a profound observation that can offer us some hope as we enter the messy world of self-injury together. He says, "Almost without exception, those who survive a tragedy give credit to one person who stood by them, supported them, and gave them a sense of hope."

I invite you to be available and willing to be that "one person" in the life of a young person who entrusts his or her story to you.