

Self Injury:
Biblical Insight and Solutions for Teens and Parents

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Introduction

In my journey through life, I came across a young girl. On the exterior, this girl seemed to have it all. After all, she was respected and loved by her family and friends and had a promising future. She was raised in a church going, middle class family, the members of which all professed to be Christians. She worked hard, got good grades in school and planned on going to college. However, inside she was living a life that was in chaos, she was haunted by memories of betrayal and hurt from her past and lived with a great sense of defeat, guilt, shame, and despair that threatened to overwhelm her. The thought, “I should have never been born” was a daily and persistent thought in her mind. This was a far off vision from the one the bible portrays of a God who longs to rescue and deliver her from affliction and who delights over her (Psalm 18:16-19, NASB). None the less, she felt desperate, alone, loaded down with guilt, and holding onto anger and bitterness of which she believes she had no escape. The first cut is made. She hopes that self injury is not the only solution to the pain she feels.

This story is not one of fiction, it is my story. Thankfully, by God’s grace and passionate pursuit of me, it was not the end of my story. There is hope for the girl who finds herself in the cycle of self injury and for parents who long to help their daughter through such turmoil. In this writing, I intend to explore biblical insights and scriptural principles that we must consider and understand as we seek to understand what lies behind self harm, help another or seek to overcome your own self harm behaviors.

The Problem

For many, the idea of one taking a blade or other object to inflict injuries on their own body is foreign and gruesome to think about. Some might ask, “Why would someone even

consider intentionally injuring themselves? Is the behavior of self injury the primary problem, or is there a deeper heart problem going on? How can the teen overcome their self injury struggle?” Self injury, also known as self harm, is not a new phenomenon. Self injury has been around since bible times. In 1 Kings 18, the bible speaks of pagan worshippers cutting themselves in order to appease the gods (Welch 2004, 2). Furthermore, in the book of Mark, we see a deeply troubled demon possessed man constantly cutting himself with stones (Mark 5:5). Even today, many people intentionally injure themselves in various ways and for various reasons.

Many of those who self harm say that they harm due to an inability to cope with memories and the hurt of past abuse they have experienced. Others say, they self harm in order to help them deal with intense emotions that tend to make it seem like their lives are spinning out of control (Welch 2004, 5-6). Other reasons people give include: a desire to escape from their current reality, a desire to punish themselves for a perceived or true wrong they have committed, an escape from the sense of being emotionally numb, a desire to be noticed or a cry for help (Penner 2008, 65-82). Regardless of one’s reason for self harming, self harm satisfies by providing temporary relief from emotional pain (Welch 2004, 6). In this writing, I choose not to focus so much on why people self harm but more on what heart attitudes are involved in the act of self harm, what the bible says about these heart attitudes and how you or a loved one can claim the freedom from self injury that can be found in Jesus Christ.

Start with the Heart

Those who self harm many times will repeatedly express the following either to themselves or others, “I hate myself, I’m a failure and I need to feel in control. I *need* to self harm because nothing else works. I can’t stop.” These statements can be summed up in three misconceptions that many who self harm experience (Penner 2008, 108-109).

Misconceptions about God

It is not uncommon for the one who self harms to have a warped view of God especially in cases where there has been past or ongoing abuse by someone whom was an authority in their lives or that they trusted. They view God as just another authority figure that is not trustworthy. They struggle to understand a world in which someone would love them unconditionally as their Heavenly Father does. Another misconception one who self harms may have is that there is no hope for me, no one understands or no one is able or wants to help me. The truth, however, is that those who truly seek the Lord and consistently read about him in the scriptures realize that even when others in our lives fail us, God will never fail us. He wants nothing more than you to know him, trust him and work side by side with him as you strive to overcome any stronghold in your life. You must however see self harm for what it is, having its root in sin, confess it as such and admit your weakness and need of a Savior (Ephesians 2:1-7; 2 Corinthians 4:7-8).

Misconceptions about Self

Those who self harm often have immense guilt. They will say, "I can't do anything right. I'm a loser." The bible's response to that is that we consistently don't do right and are guilty of wrong doing (Romans 3:9-18, 23). I realize this goes against popular culture that seems to state that building a better self esteem is a cure all (Welch 2001, 18-19). God says differently, he says due to Adam and Eve's choice to sin, we too are sinners by birth. However, though we mess up and are sinners by nature, due to Christ's gracious sacrifice on the cross we can receive His forgiveness. Furthermore, He gives us the power to overcome sin (Romans 6:5-7). We are told in Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In Christ, you are not condemned instead you are redeemed and made whole. Those who self injure at times use it as an act of punishment against themselves. Isn't it great to know that that

punishment has already been paid? Christ shed his blood and took the punishment so that we wouldn't have to (Hebrews 9:11-14). Only Christ's blood is suitable to cover sin therefore the self harmer must realize that shedding their blood as a form of punishment of self is futile.

Another area of struggle among those who self harm is acting to please and satisfy their immediate wants and desires instead of considering and following God's desires. Could this be the same idolatry that the Israelites in the Old Testament got hung up on time and time again? Idolatry is not simply the act of bowing down to a statue in worship. Idolatry takes form when we put anything before God in our lives (Matthew 22:37; 1 John 5:21). This could be the act or inward desire of worshiping pleasure, respect, love, power, control, or freedom from pain. Dr. Edward Welch, an author and biblical counselor states, "The purpose of all idolatry is to manipulate the idol for our own benefit" (Welch 2001, 49). When we look to objects or ourselves above looking to God, we find ourselves attempting to find our sufficiency in what we want instead of finding our sufficiency in Christ. There is always a benefit that one who self harms is seeking to obtain. One who self harms, often runs to the object of their desire. In speaking regarding battle against addiction or in other words idolatry, Welch also includes, "For the addict dope is God. It is the Supreme Being, the Higher Power, in the junkie's life. He is subjugated to its will. He follows its commandments. The drug [in this case being self harm] is the definition of happiness, and gives the meaning of love. Each shot of junk [or each cut of the arm with a blade] in his veins is a shot of divine love" (Welch 2001, 53). However, strange it may sound, there is a semblance of pleasure in self harming. The one who self harms, often finds their pleasure in what the self harm gives them, a false sense of peace, relief or control. On the other end of the spectrum, self harm gives them what they deserve which in their minds eye is punishment, which brings about satisfaction for the one who self harms. The bible states that it is

when we set our minds on self harm or any other idol in our lives, and do not set our minds on the Lord, we find despair, destruction and heartache. In contrast, if we set our minds on the Lord, we find life and peace (Romans 8:5-6). When we are worshiping and pursuing the Lord and putting our faith and affections in Him instead of self harm, an overflowing life of peace will result, not just a fleeting sense of peace which is found in self harm.

Misconceptions in the Mind

In today's culture, we tend to place blame circumstances and view them as causative of our bad behavior. The truth is circumstances and experiences do not cause a person to self harm. It is true that the circumstances a person endures may influence the person's view of life; however, all of these circumstances lead back to sinful humanity. Satan enjoys impregnating our minds with lies. We are constantly in a battle (Ephesians 6:12). We can choose to believe what God says about us and life or the lies Satan tries to feed us. It is so important that we take caution with what we allow into our minds. We must combat the lies Satan throws at us with God's truth. Satan wants nothing but chaos, confusion, and destruction for us, however, God wants to give us a hope and future (Jeremiah 29:11). Though Satan might try hard to sway us and discourage us in the battle, God offers us a solution. In Philippians, Paul explains that we need to think on things that are true, honorable, and lovely. The result of keeping our eyes fixed on truth is that the "God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9). It is in fixing our eyes on Jesus and setting our minds on the things of God that we have victory over temptation and sin (Colossians 3:1-17; Hebrews 12:1-3).

The Hope-Filled Solution

There are some key scriptural principles that those who self harm and those who desire to minister to one who self harms must be aware.

God is God and We are Not

The fundamental principle that God is our creator and we are the creation applies here. Since God is the creator and we are the created, we have no claim on ourselves. Our bodies were created to bring glory to our Creator (1 Corinthians 10:31). He is the author of our lives. We do not rule over our lives, he does (Colossians 1:16-17). To destroy our bodies with self injury is our attempt to rule over ourselves. Instead, we need to make sure that we are using our bodies to serve others and bring glory to God. We are told in 1 Corinthians, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own. For you have been bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:12,19-20). As God is creator and we are the created, and because He has paid the ultimate price for us by sending his Son to die for us, we do not have the right to destroy God’s creation.

Controllable Choice not Hopeless Compulsion

Webster defines compulsion as an “irresistible persistent impulse to perform an act.” One 19 year old young woman states “I don’t feel like I choose to cut – I feel like cutting chooses me. Most of the time, it’s like I am a spectator rather than a participant (Penner 2008, 97). Could self injury be an impulsive behavior that is impossible to control or is it a choice? I argue that it is a choice. As stated above, ever since the beginning of time, God has given humanity choices regarding our behavior. We can either choose his way or our way. Sin doesn’t just happen, it takes thought and intent. In the case of Adam and Eve, it was a choice to eat the fruit or not eat the fruit. God laid out the boundaries but when the serpents’ temptation came they chose the serpents’ way [or their way] instead of God’s way. This led to them being thrown out of the garden, a broken relationship with God and ultimately death and destruction (Genesis 3). Now

parallel this with a girl who sees self harm as the only solution to squash her emotional upheaval and pain. Satan promises that through self injury life will be better, she will be more in control and the girl takes the bait, choosing her solution to her troubles over God's solution, only to find out that self injury leads her into deeper despair and guilt and not the lasting peace that she longs for (Penner 2008, 86). All of this being said, I do not negate that self injury can become habitual or in another term addictive. Essentially all sin, whether it be pornography, lying, cheating, sexual promiscuity or the like can be "addictive" in a sense if we allow it to rule our lives in place of God having rule over our lives. If we are constantly giving in to sin habitually, sin will rule our hearts. Modern psychological research has yet to pinpoint exactly why self harm is so difficult to stop. Some psychologists say that much like drug addiction it releases "feel good" chemicals in the brain. This may be so, but it doesn't negate our responsibility to trust God to satisfy our every need and heal our every hurt and live a life of obedience (Psalm 145:16). Many of those who have indulged themselves in self injury for a long period of time say that there comes a time when they feel as if it no longer is a choice. Others discovered the relief of self injury by accidentally cutting themselves. It did not start out as intentional however the second time they decided to put a blade to their skin, there was a moment of hesitation and a choice was made. Many self injures can say with Paul in his letter to the Romans, "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate (Romans 7:15). Many of those who self injure do not want to self harm, they feel trapped in it. They seemingly get trapped in a cycle of intense emotions which leads to self harm, further leading to more intense emotions including guilt for having self harmed (Welch 2004, 6). In this Romans passage, Paul goes on to say that we do what we do not want to do due to the sin that dwells in us (Romans 7:20). Does this mean that those who self harm are doomed and hold no

responsibility because “my sin nature” made me do it? Absolutely not! Paul goes on to say that we have hope and that hope is found in Christ. In Christ, we are no longer doomed for failure when we are tempted to sin, but we have a Savior who came to set us free from sin and has given us the power to overcome temptation (Romans 7:24-25). Furthermore, many who self injure stop, that is a clear cut choice that has been made! If self injury was not a choice from the beginning, people would not have to choose to stop it in order to gain victory over it.

Your Identity

We are all a creation of God and when he created us, he made us in his own image (Genesis 1:26-27). This means that we were made to be like him just as when we are born we have similarities to our parents. For those who trust him for life, he has given the right to be called his child. Simply stated, your identity then is not a “self harmer” but “Child of God”. A big challenge for those who self harm is for them to see themselves as a child of God and not as a “self harmer”. Many times girls will identify themselves by their behavior but God doesn’t identify us by our behaviors. He identifies us by who we are in him. When we invite him into our lives as Lord and Savior, though we are sinners by birth, God sees us through his son, Jesus. When we come to realize our sin state and accept him for who he is, a Holy God deserving of worship. As we relinquish any control we thought we had to him who is in control of it all and surrender our hurts and desires to him, we can begin to get a proper perspective on who we are and where our identity needs to be rooted. It needs to be rooted not in self harm but in Christ. Through Christ, we are his beloved child and we need to view ourselves as such (John 1:12-13).

Hope is in Christ

In conclusion, Christ knows and understands your deepest hurts. After all, Christ went through the ultimate betrayal, loneliness, pain, and suffering as he hung on the cross being

mocked by those he poured out his life to save. You may have been betrayed by someone in your life but nothing compares to the betrayal Christ suffered on account of us. He knows temptation as he was tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1-14; 1 Corinthians 10:12-14; Hebrews 4:15). He wants to mend your broken heart and free you from the bondage of self harm. Cling to him, trust him and lay your idol of self harm at the foot of the cross, allow him to be your sufficiency. Self injury is not your identity, you through Christ have the power to change your behavior, by following him in obedience and resting in his strength, you will overcome (Isaiah 40:28-31; Isaiah 41:10; Galatians 5:1). This is God's promise to you, "The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, he will be quiet in his love, he will rejoice over you with shouts of joy (Zephaniah 3:17). Take hold of the hope found in him.

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