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## SP681-S-Cutting and Other Self-Injurious Behaviors

The University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service

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# Spotlighting Teen Issues

for  
Parents

## Cutting and Other Self-Injurious Behaviors

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**C**utting is one of several types of self-injurious behaviors that some teens and young adults may practice. Self-injury is the deliberate mutilation of a body part with the purpose of managing emotions that are perceived as too painful to express with words.

### Common Myths About Cutting

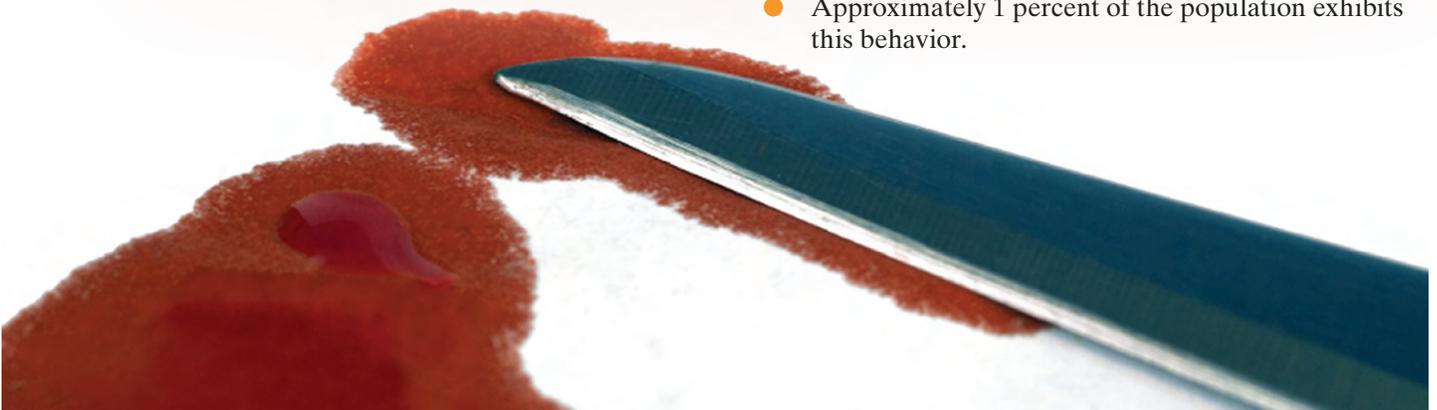
Myth	Truth
Cutting is attention-seeking behavior	Most cutters will say it is a way to deal with intense feelings when they cannot talk about them. Most cutters try to hide the fact that they are cutting themselves, so they are really not seeking attention.
Cutting is a failed suicide attempt	Most cutters do not want to die. In fact, they sometimes say they cut themselves to feel alive – not dead.
Cutters are dangerous	Most cutters are not aggressive toward others; they only hurt themselves.

### What is the motivation for cutting?

- Cutters may be punishing themselves for some perceived wrongdoing. This is often associated with having been abused.
- Some use cutting to try to reduce tension. This is often associated with family problems.
- Some use cutting to improve their mood. Cutting can actually cause the brain to release endorphins, natural chemicals that make one feel good or high. This leads to the addictive nature of the behavior.
- Some use cutting as a distraction from other painful emotions they can't handle or express. This is the primary reason for cutting.

### What are the characteristics of teens who cut or self-injure?

- The majority of cutters are female.
- They tend to be in the middle or upper socio-economic class.
- They are usually in the 15 to 35 age range.
- They are unable to function in anxiety-producing situations.
- They feel rage and powerlessness.
- They have difficulty expressing their feelings.
- Approximately 1 percent of the population exhibits this behavior.



## What should I do if I suspect my teen is cutting?

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When parents find out their teen is engaged in self-injury, they typically react with shock, disgust, fear or anger. These reactions are normal, but they will not help the situation.

Here are some suggestions for parents or other adults who may learn that a teen or young adult is a cutter.

- Try to see the pain behind the behavior.
- Offer acceptance and support.
- Let him or her know that you understand the behavior is an attempt to cope with emotions or stress.
- Offer observations or statements instead of too many questions (i.e., say something like “You seem to be under a lot of stress lately,” or “I noticed that you have been upset about something.”).
- Assure the individual that he/she is not bad or insane.
- Talk about feelings. Try to help the other person find words to express his or her feelings.
- **Seek professional help.** Get an evaluation by a mental health professional with expertise in helping persons who injure themselves. Medication may be helpful in treating the underlying cause of the behavior. Your medical doctor should be able to help with referrals.
- See if your school system or guidance counselor has programs to help self-injuring students.
- Focus on increasing your teen’s confidence by concentrating on the things he/she does well and offering encouragement in those areas.
- Generate ideas for other ways to deal with feelings: exercise, do things with a positive group of friends, help someone else.

## For More Information

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Healing Touch: A Self-Injury Website  
[http://www.healthyplace.com/Communities/Self\\_Injury/healingtouch/index.html](http://www.healthyplace.com/Communities/Self_Injury/healingtouch/index.html)

Article – Cutting, The New Teen Anorexia at <http://www.thestepfamilylife.com/Column23.htm>

Cutting article written for teens at  
[http://kidshealth.org/teen/your\\_mind/mental\\_health/cutting.html](http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/cutting.html)



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