

# CLIENT HANDOUT: SELF-INJURY (SI) A.K.A. SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE (SIV)

SI and SIV refer to certain forms of violence — cutting, hitting, burning, scratching or punching one’s self. The person’s intent is not usually to injure or maim his/her body, although it is often a side effect. The violence perpetrated against oneself happens for various reasons. It may be understood as an effective coping mechanism in the management of trauma’s sequelae; traumatic abreaction; intense emotion and distress; dissociative symptoms and/or flashbacks. Basically, people use SIV because it helps them manage what feels unbearable in the moment. Although a misconception, SIV is commonly believed to be an attention-seeking manipulation. Although it may be true that their injuries may be upsetting to others, most of the folks who self-injure do so in private — cloaked in secrecy, shrouded in shame.

According to Ruta Mazelis, author of *Demystifying Self-Inflicted Violence: Lessons Learned from the Past Dozen Years, The Cutting Edge*, “Once understood in context, SIV can be healed by acknowledging the needs it serves and addressing the trauma from which it springs. ‘People who confront the roots of their pain, and identify the patterns of survival used to manage it, build a relationship with themselves that is based on dignity and self-compassion.’”

The simplest way to explain how to stop the behavior also comes from Mazelis, “People stop living with SIV when they no longer need it, when the reasons they turned to it in the first place are in the process of being healed, and when they expand their options for managing them. Some people focus directly on learning alternatives for SIV and find that useful. Other people never focus directly on managing self-injury and find that it fades away as they work through the trauma issues that brought out the triggers that led to SIV. The common denominator learned from people who have left SIV behind him or her is that each person determined their journey regarding SIV. Coercion from persons or institutions was not effective in helping people stop SIV; in fact, it oftentimes increased not only the SIV, but exacerbated other sequelae of trauma. Force, even if apparently well-intentioned, is most often retraumatizing.”

If you are interested in exploring SIV in your life, remember that it is more important for you to focus on understanding it, i.e., what it does for you and how it has or hasn’t worked for you — rather than having the focus be immediate cessation of this “problem behavior.”

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

Don't turn away keep your gaze on the bandaged place, that's where the light comes in.

— Rumi

Here's the fact: You do this behavior for a reason. Everybody may not understand your reason(s) for the behavior — nor do they need to — but it obviously benefits you in some way. It might get you out of an intensely negative emotional experience; bring you back from a flashback; put you into — or bring you out of — a dissociative episode; communicate emotional distress to others; it may be used as a means of punishment or control; or it may feel like your only alternative to suicide.

Some people have learned self-inflicted violence as a way to manage or control the experience of overwhelm. Other people have had abusive childhood experiences where perpetrators taught them to self-injure rather than remember or disclose the abuse. Self-inflicted violence may be an attempt to integrate some traumatic information or give you a feeling of mastery over your past — a feeling of being in charge and as such, better able to cope with your earlier trauma. You may not even fully understand your reasons for the behavior; you just know that you are less stressed/tense/anxious after the act of self-inflicted violence.

Whatever your reason(s) for the behavior, it makes sense to you. Like all attempts at coping, it was a creative adjustment — in this case, to an earlier dysfunctional environment. It worked for you; it kept you alive. And that's a good thing. A very good thing. If you wish to understand your pattern with this coping mechanism, proceed with the following exercises:

### REASONS FOR SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE

- It's soothing and comforting
- It makes me feel powerful
- It stops all my feelings
- Makes me feel alive
- It helps me space out
- It helps me feel grounded
- I need to be punished for being bad/evil
- It makes me feel real
- It helps me forget
- I don't know, I just have to do it
- It just happens
- I feel more in control then
- It's how I show anger
- It helps me cry
- It's how I communicate pain/need
- It's what I know and it works
- It's the only way I can feel sexual
- It relieves tension
- I need to see blood/bruises/insides
- It helps me "go away"
- I can't remember
- I gets me focused
- Nobody can hurt me more than I
- It makes everything less real
- It makes everything more real
- It helps me feel sensation
- It feels right
- It helps me know where I begin/end

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

If other reasons fit better for you, describe them on the lines below:

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Although other people have influence and opinions regarding your behavior, you are ultimately the one who will decide how you will behave. Unless someone places you in five-point leather restraints and sits at your side 24/7, you ultimately have the freedom to act as you will. Although power struggles may ensue, it is virtually impossible to prevent someone from injuring him/herself when that is what (s)he is determined to do.

It may or may not appear self-evident, but the choice to self-injure is, and will remain, yours (as it should). In fairness, however, you have explored only the benefits of self-inflicted violence. To make an informed decision, you should identify its costs as well. Some people wish that they could stop their self-injuring behavior, citing reasons from shame, isolation, and embarrassment to more concrete reasons like having to wear long sleeves year-round and horrible experiences in the emergency room.

What are some of the costs associated with your use of self-inflicted violence?

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After exploring the costs of self-inflicted violence, you may decide that it is still an effective form of coping; that the benefits outweigh the costs, therefore, decide that now is not the time to give it up. However, after exploring the costs, you may have decided that the costs do in fact outweigh the benefits, so you may wish to try something else. Both choices are valid. No praise; no blame. Keep in mind; it is not uncommon for self-injury to continue alongside self-healing and good therapy.

If you decide that you want to stop or decrease your use of self-injury, you should remember that behavioral change is slow and recurrences are extremely common. Like everyone else, when stressed, you will tend to revert to old, familiar coping mechanisms, so prepare to start again. Perhaps you might even be gentle with yourself.

**If you're going to do this, you're going to need support!**

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

### INTERNET RESOURCES FOR SELF-INJURY

- One of the biggest and best Self-Harm Support Communities on the Internet:  
<http://www.recoveryourlife.com/>
- S.A.F.E. Alternatives® (Self-Abuse Finally Ends) is a nationally recognized treatment approach, professional network and educational resource base, which is committed to helping you and others achieve an end to self-injurious behavior:  
<http://www.selfinjury.com/>
- Formerly Bodies Under Siege SIARI: Self Injury and Related Issues International Internet service of information resources and support:  
<http://www.palace.net/~llama/psych/injury.html>
- Sidran Institute began collaboration with Ruta Mazelis, the publisher of a newsletter for people living with SIV. Now in its 15th year of publication, this newsletter — The Cutting Edge — serves as a resource for those seeking information on this often-misunderstood issue and includes editorial commentaries, written and artistic contributions from the readership, and reviews of various resources for those who live with SIV. For a PDF version of the most recent issue, go to:  
[www.healingselfinjury.org](http://www.healingselfinjury.org)

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

Lots of us have resources that we don't realize we have (friends, family, talents, skills, ideas, etc.). Sometimes it's easier to remember to call upon these resources than at other times. Often identifying and remembering what was helpful in the past gives us ideas about what might be helpful today and in the future.

Have you ever wanted to self-injure and not done it? Once or more than once? When?

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What were the circumstances?

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What did you do instead?

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What made that time (or those times) different from other times you did self-injure?

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Are there people who are helpful to be around when you feel like self-injuring?

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## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

Do you have any ideas about what might be helpful (and less costly) when you feel like self-injuring?

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### SOME MORE IDEAS

If you self-injure because it's important to feel pain, you might:

- Hold an ice cube in your hand(s)
- Dunk your face in a bowl/bucket/sink filled with ice water (see client handout "Bobbing for Reality" on page 135)
- Wearing a rubber band on your wrist, snap it
- Using boxing gloves and punching a punching bag
- Splash cold water on your face
- See grounding and centering section for exercises

Can you think of less damaging ways to feel pain?

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If you self-injure when remembering difficult or traumatic events you might:

- Do something that feels comforting instead. Explicitly reminding yourself that the abuse or event is not happening now. Although it may feel like it is happening now, the traumatic incident(s) had a beginning, middle and an end. It's over. It's over and you are safe now.

When you have this type of re-experiencing, it may be helpful to:

- Breathe in deeply and slowly.
- Breathe all of the air out.
- Look around.
- Remind yourself who, where and when you are.
- Say to yourself, "Even though I feel scared, it's not happening now. I know that because, I see that picture of me and Kara and this vase that Katie bought for me. . . ." Anything that brings you back to the here and now.
- Remind yourself out loud that you are safe and that these feelings are from a different time.
- Use multisensory imagery to create safe, comfortable places in your imagination where you can go to feel safe.
- Carry around something from the present (a stuffed animal, your therapist's business card, a stone, a photograph of someone you love) to hold on to and look at for comfort.

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

If you self-injure because you can't stop thinking about painful events, are there other ways that you might comfort yourself?

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How can you help yourself remember these options the next time you are feeling overwhelmed by these memories?

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If you self-injure to help manage your emotions, it's helpful to figure out what the emotion is; why it feels unbearable; then and develop some alternatives to how you might first identify, modulate and decide to express (or not express) the emotion.

Do any of these feelings make you want to self-injure?

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Anger	Stupid	Feeling Sexual	Sadness
Loneliness	Fear	Terror	Feeling Small
Shame	Jumpy/Nervous/Anxious	Feeling Cheated	Disappointment
Joy	Annoyance	Aggravation	Less Than
Irritation	Embarrassment	Guilt	Pleasure
	Feeling Used	Vulnerability	

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List any other feelings that make you want to self-injure.

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## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

If emotions are rough for you, it will be useful to work at increasing your tolerance for them — the full spectrum of them. Remember EMOTIONS ARE TRANSIENT! They move through you and, like events, have beginnings, middles and ends. They become problematic for us when we resist or refuse to experience them.

What helps you when you are feeling lost or overwhelmed by feelings?

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Do you have ideas about what, besides self-injury, you might try the next time you feel that way?

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Sometimes people notice that one feeling leads to another, and then another, until they need to self-injure. Here's an example: feeling sensual pleasure may remind you of abuse, which makes you feel scared, ashamed, and angry. These feelings may cycle so quickly that it is hard to really track what's going on. If this is something that you experience, then you might try:

- Just noticing your pattern.
- Attempt to slow down the process that leads you to self-injure.
- Try noticing each individual emotion, sensation, and thought as they appear.

List them below:

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Using the information about your pattern from above, when would be the best time for you to intervene?

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## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

When might it be too late to intervene?

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What interventions might work best at each point?

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Since it is often quite difficult to remember these interventions or alternatives in the midst of strong feelings, having a way to remind yourself is quite helpful. How could you remind yourself of these alternatives?

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If you self-injure because you need to comfort, self-soothe, or release tension, you may find it helpful to learn some additional methods of achieving internal peace and calmness. Here are some suggestions that others have found helpful.

### COMFORT AND SELF-SOOTHING

- Wrapping up tightly in a blanket
- Taking a warm bath or shower
- Yoga poses or meditation
- Rocking yourself — in a chair or just with your body
- Listening to CDs, such as nature sounds, music, or someone's voice that comforts you

### RELIEVING TENSION

- Running, jogging, swimming
- Walking or any other form of exercise
- Breaking glass (carefully)
- Stomping on anything (carefully)
- Doing yard work

## SELF-INFLICTED VIOLENCE, CONT.

- Throwing things (carefully)
- Pounding pillows or a mattress
- Shredding tissues or paper
- Tearing up phone books

If you use self-injury to self-soothe or release tension, what other things might be helpful for you?

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## SELF-INJURY CONTRACT

This is my self-injury contract. I've agreed to carry it around with me and refer to it/when I'm upset and want to hurt myself. I won't guarantee that I won't hurt myself, but I guarantee that I'll read and fill it out before I hurt myself.

I want to hurt myself because:

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I think it will help me to get through this moment, but it will cost me:

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Before I hurt myself, I can:

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Four people I can call before I hurt myself:

1. Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # : \_\_\_\_\_
2. Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # : \_\_\_\_\_
3. Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # : \_\_\_\_\_
4. Name : \_\_\_\_\_ Phone # : \_\_\_\_\_

One thing that I can try, that has worked before and is almost always comforting to me, is:

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The most important reminder for me:

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Sign and date: \_\_\_\_\_