

**HIDDEN SCARS,  
SILENT WOUNDS:**  
Understanding Self-Injury

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### **Teacher’s Resource Book**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Learning Objectives	2
Program Summary	3

### STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Reflections	5
2. Research Project	7
3. Self-Injury Questionnaire	9
4. Class Debate	11
5. Sending the Message	12
6. The Pressure Cooker	13
7. Art Therapy 101	14
8. Alternatives	15
9. Finding Help	16
10. Feedback	17
11. Written Words	18
12. Arguments	19

### FACT SHEETS

1. What is Self-Injury?	20
2. Warning Signs	21
3. Getting Help	22
4. Avoiding the Urge	23
5. Expressing Strong Feelings	25
6. Challenging Arguments	26
7. Bibliography	27

Other Guidance Products from Human Relations Media	28
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In recent years, self-injury has received a growing amount of coverage in the press, in movies, and on television. Young people seem to be at special risk for this frightening behavior, which is defined as deliberate, repetitive, impulsive, non-lethal harming of one's own body. Self-injurious actions can include cutting, scratching, picking scabs or interfering with wound healing, burning, punching, inserting objects in body openings, bruising or breaking bones, serious forms of hair pulling, as well as other types of bodily harm.

Although the problem has only recently gained wide attention, self-injury has been around for centuries. Today, it is estimated that nearly two million people in the United States self-injure. The injuries are rarely life threatening. Rather, they are a cry for help—an attempt to express pain that cannot be communicated verbally or that will not be heard by others. The blood, bruises, and scars of self-injury say to the world, “Look at the pain I am in.” Self-injury can also be an attempt to punish the body for being “dirty” or “corrupted.” Not surprisingly, about 65 percent of self-injurers were physically or sexually abused as children.

Females seem more likely to self-injure, taking their pain inward while males often choose outward behaviors such as violence or drug abuse. For males and females, the first episodes of self-injury usually begin around the onset of puberty. Without treatment, the problem can last for many years. Many people, especially parents and those who care for self-injurers, often react to the problem with fear, disgust, and anger. It is almost inconceivable that people would hurt themselves while seeming to take pleasure from the pain. It is important to remember that self-injurers are facing an altered reality. For a few moments, self-injury seems to relieve their pain. But the relief is temporary, and it is part of a destructive cycle. Like drug addiction, the emotional “high” associated with self-injury tends to require larger and more intense episodes as time progresses. This escalation can cause serious physical and emotions problems.

Self-injurers are typically very secretive about the behavior. Frequently, warning signs are either non-existent or ignored by friends and family. These signs include unexplained injuries, wearing long sleeves during warm weather, and extreme secrecy. If these signs are noticed, a mental-health professional should be consulted immediately. Only a professional can diagnose and treat a self-injury problem.

The program *Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds: Understanding Self-Injury* is designed to help teachers and students better understand this serious problem and learn how to effectively deal with it. Activities in this Teacher's Resource Book will educate students about self-injury, while helping those who might be at-risk think more carefully about their situations. Specific steps are also given to guide those who might be (or might know someone) in need of immediate intervention.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After watching the video *Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds: Understanding Self-Injury* and participating in the class activities included in this Teacher's Resource Book, your students will be able to:

- better understand self-injury in its various forms
- recognize the physical and emotional warning signs of self-injury
- identify the primary problems that can lead to self-injury
- realize that self-injury is not hopeless and that it can be treated
- learn how to communicate strong emotions, even in challenging situations
- more effectively label strong emotions and look at the underlying problems causing them
- understand and discuss the various treatments for self-injury
- identify and explore resources that can help someone who self-injures
- discuss the differences between self-injury and other behaviors, such as body piercing

*Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds: Understanding Self-Injury* begins with a montage of young people discussing self-injury. They talk about the need to punish themselves and to feel alive. A female narrator describes the pressures facing today's young people. While some may turn to sports, music and fashion to escape from painful feelings, others choose drugs, alcohol, and self-injury. The narrator explains that about two million people in the United States self-injure. While the practice was once thought to be fairly obscure, it is now gaining widespread attention.

Karen Conterio, Administrative Director of S.A.F.E. Alternatives™, gives a brief history of self-injury. It was once considered to be a psychotic behavior resulting in gross injuries, such as amputated limbs. Today, however, most self-injuries are not as drastic, such as superficial cuts or burns. However, the emotional impact of self-injury can be very dangerous even if the bodily harm is not extensive.

Michelle Seliner, Program Coordinator at S.A.F.E. Alternatives™, describes various forms of self-injury, including cutting, scratching, burning or pulling hair. Wendy Lader, PhD, Clinical Director of S.A.F.E. Alternatives™, explains why people resort to these painful behaviors. She says they want to feel better. When they self-injure, they do feel better—temporarily. These people typically have a need to communicate strong feelings that may be difficult to convey with words.

Amy Johnson, a patient at S.A.F.E., describes her experiences with self-injury. After her father died and her brother molested her, Amy felt very bad about herself. Self-injury was a way to punish herself. She did not know any other way to stop the pain. About 65 percent of self-injurers have a history of sexual or physical abuse. Another event that can contribute to self-injury is divorce or separation. After a woman named Michele was divorced, her daughter began cutting herself. Michele was shocked and angered by the behavior. She describes how she and her daughter have worked to heal their lives.

Sam, a young girl who was severely abused as a child, shares her story. For years, she tried to find words to express her pain, but no one would listen. Her need to injure herself increased from punching, to cutting and burning, and then to more serious acts. At one point, Sam shot herself and faced a life-threatening injury. It was then that she realized she needed help.

Other factors that can contribute to self-injury include invalidating environments and biological problems, such as clinical depression. Both men and women self-injure, but women are much more likely to ask for help. In addition, female self-injurers are frequently unhappy with their bodies, and as many as 85 percent suffer from eating disorders.

Dr. Lader explains that self-injurers want to get rid of painful feelings by bleeding or “cleansing” themselves. Some may also try to get rid of feelings by purging after eating. Most self-injurers feel that they are strong, because they are able to handle pain that others cannot. In reality, they are avoiding emotional pain and the problems underneath.

Next, Dr. Lader discusses the difference between body art and self-injury. She explains that body art is often a normal part of growing up and self-expression. However, the need to be noticed is closely related to self-injury. Both behaviors can have an addictive quality.

Self-injury is a coping mechanism. Most self-injurers are not trying to kill themselves, although accidental suicides are also a risk. As with drug addiction, the behavior can increase until it becomes very dangerous. It is important to recognize warning signs and respond to them as soon as possible. These signs include unexplained injuries, wearing winter clothes in warm weather, having low self-esteem, and being withdrawn or secretive.

Joni Nowicki, a therapist at S.A.F.E., says that parents typically respond to self-injury by trying to keep all dangerous objects away from the child. Since this is almost impossible, it results in the child being “held hostage” at all times. Joni understands that it is difficult for parents to know what to do. She suggests talking to a self-injurer and listening respectfully. She also warns that the problem of self-injury is too great for an individual to take on alone. Only a mental-health professional can treat a self-injury problem. She suggests that family members be supportive, while getting help immediately.

Dr. Lader explains that many self-injurers, and some therapists, believe that feelings must be released immediately. This is not always true. Sometimes it’s important to feel anger and pain and to tolerate them. By learning to express the feelings, patients can begin to form healthier relationships. This takes place at S.A.F.E. in the form of group therapy and role playing activities. Along with other forms of therapy (and sometimes medication), this interaction helps patients begin to heal.

As the program concludes, patients share their ongoing struggles with self-injury, as well as their belief in the promise of recovery. Dr. Lader says that anyone can get better if they can face their problems and understand that they have a choice not to self-injure.

# **STUDENT ACTIVITIES**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Using what you learned in the program *Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds: Understanding Self-Injury*, answer each question below in your own words.

1. Why do people self-injure?

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2. Why do some self-injurers temporarily feel better about themselves? Why do they sometimes feel stronger than other people?

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3. What are some common forms of self-injury?

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4. Why is self-injury sometimes used as a desperate form of communication?

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5. What are some of the problems that can contribute to self-injury?

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6. Why do more females seem to self-injure than males?

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7. What are some of the warning signs of self-injury?

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8. What should you do if you suspect someone of being a self-injurer?

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*This activity is continued on the next page.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The responses below are not meant as the only answers to the questions posed in Activity 1a. Use these answers as a starting point for further discussion.

**1. Why do people self-injure?**

Some people self-injure to temporarily feel better or to feel alive, or to communicate difficult emotions or a need for help, or to punish themselves.

**2. Why do some self-injurers temporarily feel better about themselves? Why do they sometimes feel stronger than other people?**

They may think, “I can handle more pain than other people.” However, the feeling is short-lived because they are avoiding the problems causing the pain and anger.

**3. What are some common forms of self-injury?**

Common forms include cutting, burning, pinching, pulling hair, inserting objects into body openings, eating disorders, and drug or alcohol abuse.

**4. Why is self-injury sometimes used as a desperate form of communication?**

Self-injury is a way to tell the world, “I’m in pain.” People who feel ignored or invisible may use self-injury to get attention.

**5. What are some of the problems that can contribute to self-injury?**

Common problems include death in the family, divorce or separation, family members who do not listen or validate emotions, sexual or physical abuse, and psychological problems that are biological (such as clinical depression).

**6. Why do more females seem to self-injure than males?**

Males often have a harder time asking for help. Because of social pressures, they feel the need to be “macho” and deal with their problems. This can lead to violence toward others. Females, on the other hand, are more likely to take things out on themselves than on others.

**7. What are some of the warning signs of self-injury?**

Signs include unexplained injuries, wearing winter clothing during warm months, low self-esteem, being withdrawn, inability to function at work or school, and serious depression or anxiety.

**8. What should you do if you suspect someone of being a self-injurer?**

Try to communicate with the friend, if you feel comfortable doing so. Learn all that you can about the situation. Let the friend know that you care and that you are there to support him or her. Also let the friend know that you are not equipped to handle the problem alone. Tell the friend that outside help is absolutely necessary. Offer to go with your friend to find help. If your friend doesn’t seek help, find someone to help by yourself.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Research one of the topics from the following list, and write a brief paper on your findings. You can gather information at your school or local library, as well as on the Internet. Use a *Resource Tracker* (Activity 2b) to collect information.

**Eating Disorders**

Why are eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia forms of self-injury? What do they have in common with mutilation, such as cutting or burning? What roles do control and self-punishment play in eating disorders? How are eating disorders typically treated?

**Normal versus Dangerous**

Are tattooing and piercing “normal” forms of self-injury? What is the difference between healthy youthful rebellion and a pathological problem? How might a fairly harmless act, such as a body piercing, trigger a habit of self-injury?

**Forms of Treatment**

What are some ways that self-injury is treated? What types of therapy are used? What types of medications are used? What are the most successful forms of treatment?

**Girls and Self-Injury**

Why are girls more visible sufferers of self-injury? What role does our society’s obsession with body image play? How does our culture’s view of sexuality (i.e. women as sexual objects) fuel bodily hatred?

**Boys and Self-Injury**

Why do males usually hide self-injury more than females? What other destructive coping mechanisms do males use to express strong emotions? What are some healthy coping mechanisms that men frequently rely on?

**S.A.F.E. Alternatives™**

The book *Bodily Harm*, by Karen Conterio and Wendy Lader, PhD, founders of S.A.F.E. Alternatives™, provides a wealth of information about this program. How does this program differ in its approach from traditional mental-health treatments? What are some of the activities used to treat self-injurers? What are the ground rules that must be followed by all patients?



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**SELF-INJURY QUESTIONNAIRE**

What is the difference between normal behavior and a true self-injury problem? There are no simple answers, but taking the questionnaire below will help you think more carefully about your own personal situation. It is not meant to be a form of diagnosis. Instead, it is designed to help you honestly look at your own behaviors. *Be as honest as possible. No one will see your answers.*

1. I have chosen to have plastic surgery more than once.  
 TRUE  FALSE
2. I have chosen to have plastic surgery against the advice of a doctor.  
 TRUE  FALSE
3. My friends and family have become concerned about my body piercing.  
 TRUE  FALSE
4. When I get a tattoo or a piercing, I feel a rush or a calming sensation.  
 TRUE  FALSE
5. I get anxious when anyone tries to stop me from getting a tattoo or a piercing.  
 TRUE  FALSE
6. I have exercised until I was sick or until I hurt myself.  
 TRUE  FALSE
7. I have sometimes neglected medical attention for an injury.  
 TRUE  FALSE
8. My doctor, close friends, or family members have told me I am underweight, but I would still like to lose a few more pounds.  
 TRUE  FALSE
9. I am secretly happy when I can avoid eating a meal.  
 TRUE  FALSE
10. I often think about self-injury.  
 TRUE  FALSE

*This activity is continued on the next page.*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**SELF-INJURY QUESTIONNAIRE**

11. I sometimes can't explain where my injuries come from.  
 TRUE  FALSE
12. I get anxious when my wounds start to heal.  
 TRUE  FALSE
13. No one can hurt me more than I can hurt myself.  
 TRUE  FALSE
14. I have carved words or symbols into my flesh.  
 TRUE  FALSE
15. The sight of my blood comforts me.  
 TRUE  FALSE

If you answer "true" to any of these questions, it may be a sign that you have a problem with self-injury. It does not necessarily mean that you are a self-injurer, but you should think carefully about an emotional high that is linked to any of the behaviors mentioned.

If you are concerned about yourself, talk with a person you trust. You can also call:

1-800-DON'T-CUT

or

National Youth Crisis Hotline  
1-800-448-4663

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Divide the class into two equal groups. Using one of the topics below, one group must argue *yes* and the other group must argue *no*. Each side must support its position with researched facts and valid, respectful arguments.

**Is body art a form of self-injury?**

In recent years, piercing and tattooing have become extremely popular forms of self-expression. Many people feel that they are a normal rite of passage for young people. On the other hand, body art and self-injury both use pain to get attention—to give people an identity when they may have trouble finding it in other ways. And like self-injury, body art can have an addictive quality.

**Should self-injury be illegal?**

Other victimless crimes, such as the use of illegal drugs and the failure to wear a seat belt, are illegal. Why shouldn't self-injury be illegal, too? Like drug abuse, it creates a desire for more and stronger forms of pain relief. On the other hand, most people consider a person's body to be private property. Furthermore, most self-injurers need serious help. Legal problems or jail time would make getting that help much harder.

**Is our society's obsession with appearance harmful?**

We are bombarded with images that claim that beauty is an all-important quality. Ads, magazine articles, and movies show us people with perfect bodies, faces, and skin. Does this cultural obsession with appearance play a large role in self-injury problems such as cutting and eating disorders? Or is the focus on appearance a harmless part of human nature? Does it simply reflect our desire to see the beauty of the world?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Being young is tough. It helps if we can talk to someone about our feelings and know they are listening. Of course, it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes it's hard to explain how we feel. Even if we find the words, there may be times when others don't understand them. Although we may feel hopeless, there is always a way to be heard. Someone out there is willing to listen. Working with three classmates, read each situation below. Brainstorm with your group to come up with a positive solution for each one.

1. Molly is having trouble with advanced geometry. She has always been good at math, but this class is moving too quickly. Molly tries to tell her father (who is raising her alone) that she wants to change to regular geometry. But he insists that she is smarter than that, and that she can stick it out. Having advanced geometry, he says, will be crucial to her college application. Molly is so stressed out and frustrated, she sits in geometry class thinking of ways to escape—and getting farther behind.
2. Jamal is the only brother of three sisters. Each sister is beautiful and popular. But Jamal has bouts of acne and trouble keeping his weight down. His parents spend much of their time and attention focusing on the sisters. Because they want Jamal to “fit in” with the family, they only seem to praise him when he is able to lose weight. Lately, Jamal has been eating less and less. He is losing weight rapidly, but inside he feels depressed and lonely. His parents and sisters tell him that he looks great and that he should cheer up.
3. Kat used to be a cheerful girl. When she was 12, her father became ill. After a painful year of hospital visits and treatments, Kat's mother asked her father for a divorce. Kat's mother could not take the pressures that the illness was causing. Kat and her mother moved away. Kat only saw her father a few times a year. She was sad and angry that she could not be with her ill father. Whenever she tried to talk with her mother about the problem, her mother refused to listen.
4. Pedro is a quiet boy who has no real friends. He is prone to violent outbursts and fights. At home, things are not good. Pedro's mother has a string of boyfriends, and some of them physically abuse Pedro. Because of Pedro's discipline problems, teachers do not pay much attention to the bruises on his face. One teacher asked Pedro about the bruises by saying, “Did you start another fight, Pedro?” Angry and frightened, Pedro did not know how to respond.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE PRESSURE COOKER**

Some people believe that strong feelings, such as anger, must be released by some physical action. If left to build up, the feelings will explode or cause great harm. This theory, known as the Pressure Cooker Theory, may help us get inside the minds of self-injurers. For instance, some self-injurers try to rid themselves of painful feelings by cutting or burning their skin to release their unspoken emotions.

To learn more about the Pressure Cooker Theory, answer the questions below in your own words.

1. There has never been a recorded case of someone literally “exploding” because of strong emotions. Yet this theory is very popular. Why do you think people want to rid themselves of emotions so quickly?

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2. Our society is very focused on quick fixes. How do all the advertisements for drugs and medicines affect our attitude about painful feelings?

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3. According to the Pressure Cooker Theory, we should get rid of strong feelings as soon as possible. What is wrong with this idea? How can dealing with emotions and working through them help to make our lives better?

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4. If strong feelings don’t have to be eliminated as soon as possible, what should we do with them? (HINT: In the program *Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds*, the young people going through the S.A.F.E. program participated in group therapy to learn the answer to this question.)

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5. In the past, some self-injurers have been taught to hold an ice cube or snap a rubber band against their wrist. How might this behavior reinforce the Pressure Cooker Theory, and keep the self-injurer from making progress?

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Art therapy takes many forms, but basically it involves using creativity to express inner feelings. Like kids playing with finger paints, art therapy encourages people to create before thinking. With practice, this allows subconscious (sometimes happy, sometimes painful) emotions to flow straight onto the paper.

Since art therapy is easiest to do when people are not watching or looking over your shoulder, you'll want to try it at home. You can use markers, paints, or colored pencils... any medium you like. Follow the tips below to get started. This kind of art can be done by anyone—skilled artist or total beginner.

Remember, it doesn't matter how well you can draw or paint—only you will see the results. The key is opening up and letting your thoughts flow.

- Find a quiet space where you won't be interrupted by people, phone calls, or anything else.
- Don't listen to music or watch television while creating. It can get in the way of your creative flow.
- Use a large piece of paper, such as a piece of poster board, butcher paper, or drawing paper.
- Set up your materials so they are all within easy reach. For instance, if you are painting, have plenty of water and paper towels handy. The idea is to avoid being interrupted once you get started.
- Start as quickly as you can. Just pick a color without thinking and dive in.
- Remember that anything goes. Try to ignore thoughts like, "Don't draw that," or "That won't look good." Try to create without thinking.
- When you are finished, step away from your creation and think about it. Soon afterward, write a few paragraphs about the piece. How did it make you feel while you were creating it? How do you feel when you look at it now? What do the images mean to you, if anything?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

We all have painful moments in our lives. Self-injury is something that can happen when a person feels like there is no other choice. This activity will show you that there are always other choices. Fill out this sheet with your own personal ideas, and then keep it in a handy place as a reminder.

When I'm stressed out, the best person to calm me down is \_\_\_\_\_ .

I can reach this person at \_\_\_\_\_ . (phone number)

When I need to unwind, I read my favorite book or magazine:

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When I need to calm down, I close my eyes and picture:

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When I need a break, I take a mini-vacation by closing my eyes and imaging I am in:

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When I need to laugh, I watch my favorite funny movie:

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When I want to feel happy, I think about the time that:

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When I need to relax, I like to:

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When I need to be good to myself, I treat myself to:

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>ACTIVITY 9</b>
<b>FINDING HELP</b>

The most important step in recovering from self-injury, or any harmful behavior, is recognizing the danger of the problem and getting help. Whether it's you or a friend who is in trouble, you need to have good information.

Use the Internet, library resources, local phone books, your school counseling office and other information sources to complete each area below.

Find five phone numbers or hotlines you can call if you or someone you care about is in a crisis situation (feeling suicidal, injuring self, etc.):

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Find three places in your area that offer counseling referral services. These facilities can suggest local counselors, therapists, or hospitals.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Find five websites offering information and resources related to self-injury:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_

Of these websites, which one did you find the most helpful? Why?

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

What would you do if a friend were hurting himself or herself? Even if you can't resolve such a serious problem on your own, it would help your friend if you could be supportive and understanding. For this activity, practice your ability to offer support by writing a letter to one of the people mentioned below. Each person was featured in the program *Hidden Scars, Silent Wounds*.

*Amy*

After her father died and her mother went to work, Amy became depressed and began having trouble in school. Later, Amy's brother molested her. She resorted to self-injury because she did not know any other way to deal with the pain. Pretend that Amy is your friend. You know about her problem, and you worry that she is really going to hurt herself unless you say something. Write Amy a letter expressing your concern.

*Sam*

Along with her sister, Sam was severely abused by her mother. Her cries for help went unnoticed, so she became a self-injurer. At her lowest point, Sam shot herself and faced a life-threatening injury. That's when she knew she needed help. Pretend that Sam is your friend. As she seeks treatment for her self-injury, she needs more support from you than ever. Write Sam a letter to encourage her during her treatment.

*Michele and her daughter*

Michele's daughter always had trouble making friends. When her parents divorced, her loneliness and social isolation got worse. She began cutting herself as a coping mechanism. When her mother found out, she was shocked and angry. Even though Michele's daughter is now getting treatment, she and her mother continue to struggle with what has happened. Michele's mother feels that her daughter used the cutting to control the emotions of others. Write a letter to Michele or to her daughter explaining how you feel about the situation. Try to use supportive, respectful language.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Writing is a powerful and healthy way to deal with strong feelings. It can help you sort out your thoughts and identify the problems behind your emotions. Choose one of the writing assignments below, and write at least two full pages. You do not have to show the pages to anyone. They are only for you to see.

***Assignment 1: My Good and Bad***

What do you like about yourself? In what ways could you become a better person? Describe at least three positive and three negative things about yourself.

***Assignment 2: Feelings***

Describe some things that make you feel the following emotions: anger, sadness, happiness, love and fear. What people or events are related to these feelings? What are some ways you can positively deal with these situations and the feelings they cause?

***Assignment 3: The Person I Can Be***

What do you want your life to be about? Where do you picture yourself in five years? What are your goals? What are some things that might get in the way of these goals?

***Assignment 4: Taking Care of Me***

How can you take care of yourself after a bad day? What can you do to cheer yourself up? List specific activities or people who make you feel better. Can anything get in the way of these activities? If so, what?

***Assignment 5: My Favorite Person***

Who do you enjoy being around the most? How does it feel to be around this person? What do you like most about this person? What does this person contribute to your life?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

People who self-injure usually don't know any other, more productive way to deal with their feelings. That makes them very unwilling to give up their harmful behavior. Below are six common arguments used by those who self-injure. Read each one closely. Working with another classmate, think of a way to refute—or prove false—each argument.

When you are finished, check out the suggestions given on Fact Sheet 6, *Challenging Arguments*.

Argument 1: Self-Injury Doesn't Hurt Anyone.

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Argument 2: It's My Body and I Can Do Whatever I Want.

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Argument 3: It's the Best Way to Show People My Pain.

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Argument 4: It Keeps People Away.

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Argument 5: It's Not My Fault.

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Argument 6: I'm Stronger Than Others. I Can Take the Pain.

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# **FACT SHEETS**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Self-injury** is a deliberate, repetitive, non-lethal harming of one's body. It is a way to cope with, relieve, or express painful feelings. People may also self-injure to punish themselves, feel alive, or get attention from others. Relief is short-lived and prevents the self-injurer from feeling or dealing with deeper emotional pains.

**Types of self-injury include:**

- cutting
- scratching
- picking scabs or interfering with wound healing
- burning
- punching self or objects
- infecting oneself
- inserting objects in body openings
- bruising or breaking bones
- serious forms of hair pulling
- other various forms of bodily harm

**Problems that can lead to self-injury include:**

- death in the family
- divorce or separation
- an unstable environment (such as moving frequently)
- sexual and/or physical abuse
- family members who do not listen or allow feelings to be expressed
- psychological problems that are biological (such as clinical depression)

**Other self-injury facts:**

There are about two million self-injurers in the United States.

More females self-injure than males.

Most self-injurers begin to hurt themselves during puberty.

Self-injury can be treated successfully.

Almost half of all self-injurers report a history of physical and/or sexual abuse.

Many self-injurers were discouraged from expressing emotions during childhood.

Many self-injurers also struggle with eating disorders and alcohol or substance abuse.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Some warning signs of self-injury include:**

unexplained injuries  
scars on the arms or legs  
a pattern of curious scabs or abrasions  
sharp objects (razor blades, pieces of glass, bent paper clips,  
etc.) stored in unusual places  
wearing winter clothing during warm months  
low self-esteem  
being withdrawn or very secretive  
being distracted or preoccupied  
refusing to explain injuries or scars  
inability to function at work or school  
serious depression  
serious anxiety

**Signs of behaviors that frequently accompany self-injury include:**

serious, unexplained weight loss  
obsession with food and dieting  
skipping meals frequently  
compulsive exercising  
spending time in the bathroom after each meal  
excessive piercing or tattooing  
drug or alcohol abuse

If you recognize any of these signs in yourself or in a friend,  
contact a mental health professional in your area  
or call 1-800-DON'T-CUT  
or the National Youth Crisis Hotline at 1-800-448-4663.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**What if someone I care about is hurting herself (or himself)?**

Immediately talk with the person about the importance of getting help. Start by letting the person know that you care and that you are concerned. Try not to judge or express horror, anger or shock. You certainly may feel those things, but expressing them to the self-injurer will only make things worse.

Help the self-injurer find a mental-health professional. Only a doctor or therapist can diagnose and treat a self-injury problem. Look in your yellow pages under *psychotherapists*, *counselors*, and *psychiatrists*, or try one of the sources listed below.

If the person is unwilling to get help, talk to someone else. First, try her parents or family. If they won't help or acknowledge the problem, talk to a school counselor or a teacher. Ask the adult's help in finding a mental-health professional.

Be supportive, but remember that you cannot fix the problem. The best thing you can do is listen and let the person know that you care. Encourage the person to get treatment and to stick with the treatment.

**What if I am hurting myself?**

Get help right away. Talk to an adult you trust, such as a family member or teacher. Ask the adult to help you find a mental-health professional.

You may choose to find help yourself by looking in the yellow pages under *psychotherapists*, *counselors*, and *psychiatrists*, or by trying one of the sources listed below.

**What will treatment be like?**

Self-injurers can be treated with outpatient therapy or inpatient hospitalization, depending on the seriousness of the case. Treatment for eating disorders, alcohol/substance abuse, trauma abuse, and family therapy can also be combined with other forms of treatment. Several types of treatment may be used together, including:

**Cognitive/behavioral therapy** helps the patient understand how thoughts and behaviors can be changed in a positive way to increase confidence and self-control.

**Group therapy** helps patients learn to communicate feelings and relate to others in a healthy way.

**Medication** is often used with therapy to treat depression, anxiety, and other problems.

**Sources of Help:**

S.A.F.E. Alternatives™ 1-800-DON'T-CUT <a href="http://www.selfinjury.com">www.selfinjury.com</a>	National Youth Crisis Hotline 1-800-448-4663	National Mental Health Association 1-800-969-6942 <a href="http://www.nmha.org">www.nmha.org</a>
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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The impulse to self-injure can be delayed by choosing to perform a safer comforting activity. The activity may not have the same numbing effect as self-injury, but it will give you time to think rationally for a moment. The thoughts and feelings that come may be painful, but remember that these emotions are the first step toward understanding problems, healing, and feeling better.

1. Filling out an Impulse Control Log (see Fact Sheet 4b for a sample).
2. Writing your feelings in a journal.
3. Talking and listening to a trusted person.
4. Just sitting and allowing yourself to experience feelings.
5. Taking a walk or exercising.
6. Listening to music.
7. Working on an arts & crafts project, like painting or ceramics.
8. Playing an instrument, like guitar or piano.
9. Cooking a meal.
10. Taking a warm bath or shower.
11. Challenging irrational thoughts.
12. Writing a letter to a friend.
13. Petting a dog or cat.
14. Doing breathing techniques. They can be done anywhere, at any time. Most breathing techniques involve slowly breathing in and out while counting silently.
15. Closing your eyes and repeating a comforting word over and over, such as *peace*.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Impulse Control Log**

Self-injury thoughts: (e.g. cutting, burning)

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Time, date and location (where the impulse took place):

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Situation: (what was happening)

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Feelings: (e.g. alone, angry)

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What would self-injury accomplish?

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What would I be trying to communicate with my self-injury?

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Outcome: (what happened?)

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Comments: (any other thoughts)

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*Source: S.A.F.E. Alternatives™*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The next time that you are in a situation that stirs up strong emotions, use the tips below to help you express yourself.

1. Stop and think, what am I feeling? What is causing the feeling? Who is involved?
2. Ask yourself, “Who can I talk to about these feelings?” If you feel angry or hurt by someone, consider letting that person know how you feel.
3. Give yourself time to cool off, and then find the earliest opportunity to talk privately with the person. Waiting too long can lower your willingness to communicate.
4. Express your feelings as honestly and respectfully as you can.
5. It’s okay to be angry, but it’s not necessary to yell, call names or accuse the other person.
6. Be prepared to defend your feelings.
7. Give the other person a chance to respond or explain. Show that you are listening.
8. If you need something from the other person, make that need clear. For example, if your sister plays loud music while you are studying, ask her to think about your feelings and turn the music down.
9. If the person does not respect what you are saying or will not listen, accept it. You cannot change other people or decide how they will act. You can only tell them how you feel.
10. Find someone else to talk with—a teacher, friend, school counselor or relative. There is always someone who will listen.

Below are some common arguments (or rationalizations) that are often used by self-injurers, as well as some clear thoughts on why these arguments fail.

**Argument 1: Self-Injury Doesn't Hurt Anyone.**

The self-injurer *always* gets hurt. Many self-injurers do not feel important, and therefore they don't think that their pain matters. It does! Although self-injury might make a person feel better for a short time, it can cause long-term emotional (as well as physical) problems.

**Argument 2: It's My Body and I Can Do Whatever I Want.**

There are laws that prohibit people from harming themselves or others. However, most self-injury is minor enough to escape legal attention. So it's true that self-injurers usually can't be stopped. The question to ask is, "Do you really *want* to do this? Do you really understand what you are doing to yourself and why?"

**Argument 3: It's the Best Way to Show People My Pain.**

There are always better ways to express how you are feeling. Even when friends and family cannot or will not listen, there are still counselors and health-care workers who are available to help. Although many self-injurers believe that their cuts and scars are a persuasive way to convey their pain, others usually do not see it that way. When confronted with a self-injurer's scars, most people feel repulsion or fear instead of pity.

**Argument 4: It Keeps People Away.**

Actually, the more often a person self-injures, the more likely it is that people—counselors, law enforcement officers, doctors—are going to intrude into their lives. We all deserve personal space, but self-injury is not a healthy or effective way to get it.

**Argument 5: It's Not My Fault.**

Many self-injurers do not believe they are responsible because they are so numb to the world and the things that set off their desire to injure. Regardless of the pain that exists in a person's life, it is always that person's choice to injure. That is the meaning of the term "self-injury."

**Argument 6: I'm Stronger Than Others. I Can Take the Pain.**

The pain, while very real, is just a shield protecting the self-injurer from a greater fear—emotional pain. Eventually, as the self-injurer becomes numb, he or she is unable to feel the normal things that other people feel—physically or emotionally.

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