

Fisher: Teens show off scars in cutting's pandemic of pain

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There's a photo floating around Facebook showing a pair of shapely legs crisscrossed by dozens of horrifying scars, made by razor cuts. The cryptic caption reads, "The Cat."

I had to ask my 15-year-old daughter what it meant.

"People blame it on the cat," she explained. "When people are cutting themselves, they use the excuse, 'Oh, my cat attacked me.' It's like a normal thing to see on teenagers these days."

Cutting as a sign of mental distress isn't new. But these days, it's so pervasive that nearly every high school kid knows someone who's doing it.

It's such a part of the culture, it's a ringtone: "*There's blood in the bathtub, baby,*" sings lead singer Dax Riggs of sludge metal band [Acid Bath](#) in "[Scream of the Butterfly](#)." "*There's blood on the moon ... There's blood on just about everything ... I cut myself to remind me of you.*"

I first became interested in this topic when my own teenagers started coming home telling me about schoolmates at their middle-class high school who were cutting themselves. With razors. With pen knives. With slicers. Even with pencils.

Paradoxically, "cutters" usually injure themselves to relieve stress, depression and pain – emotional pain they can't find any other way to release. And they're sophisticated about how to do it. They know where to cut so others won't see the scars.

But not all cutters want to keep their activities a secret. Some show the scars. Or post photos on social media.

"Want to see some scars that people posted on [Instagram](#)?" a pair of teenage girls ask me when I quiz them on the topic. "We can show you."

"Really?" I ask. "People post this stuff online?"

"Sure," they tell me. "All the time."

They fiddle with their phones and quickly pull up images of their classmates, arms full of scars. Photos posted online, for all to see. I wonder if their parents have any idea.

Some studies estimate that between 12 percent and 23 percent of people today will injure themselves on purpose at some time in their life. This does not include piercing, tattooing or eating disorders.

It's important to distinguish between people who injure themselves to relieve stress and those who are suicidal. "Non-suicidal self-injury" is the technical term for cutting, said Dr. [Atur Turakhia](#), medical director of [UC Irvine's inpatient adolescent psychiatry unit](#). It can include cutting, burning, scratching or bruising.

Turakhia has seen many youngsters come in for help. Some need to be hospitalized, others can go to private therapy or attend an outpatient clinic.

“There’s a lot of emotional distress underneath,” Turakhia told me. “They are creating physical pain to numb the emotional pain after they get overwhelmed and don’t know what to do about it.”

Reasons he sees include depression, physical and emotional abuse, sexual abuse, alcohol and drug problems. Research hasn’t shown ethnicity to be a factor, he said, but one study suggested that it is more prevalent in middle- to upper-class girls.

“One thing we try to do, especially in our inpatient unit, is try to provide them with coping skills to relieve distress, such as drawing or talking,” Turakhia said. Patients who crave the painful feeling can use a rubber band to snap on their wrists when they feel like hurting themselves.

Brandy Kyle, who is now 20, is the daughter of a friend. When she was in high school, she remembers taking a pencil and a comb and cutting a four-letter word into the side of her leg so deeply it bled. She still has the scars.

“I was upset and under a lot of stress,” she said. “I was mad at my teacher because she read my text messages out loud to the class, and I was already being teased a lot.”

To control her anger, she spent an hour deliberately carving her leg. “It just distracted me for a minute,” she remembers. “I was less angry.”

What would she tell cutters today?

“I would say listening to music is a better way to cope,” she said. “Those scars are going to stay with you for the rest of your life. You might want to stop now.”

Depictions of teenage cutting on TV shows and in movies such as “[Thirteen](#),” “[Prison Break](#)” and “[7th Heaven](#)” that “show characters using self-injury to calm down and to deal with upsetting situations” may make the practice seem more familiar or even something to be tried at home, according to the [Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery](#) at Cornell University. And the characters are rarely shown getting help for their disorders.

Actress and singer [Demi Lovato](#) told “Access Hollywood” in December that she decided to try cutting after she saw it on TV.

Lovato’s cutting was noticed in 2008 when several scars could be seen on her wrist in a red carpet photo. At first, Lovato claimed they were caused by tight-fitting bracelets. But later she admitted that she’d been cutting herself since she was 11 or 12.

“For some reason, it’s more taboo to talk about than drugs or alcohol,” [Lovato told “Access Hollywood” in an on-camera interview](#). “You think of it as such a dark thing. Just because you’re cutting doesn’t mean you’re suicidal. It’s something that’s really, really prominent in young girls today. And it’s something that parents don’t want to address at all. Because they’re embarrassed.”

Lovato continued, “Sometimes when you are feeling so numb, just by being depressed or anything, you just want to feel. ... Honestly, I saw it on TV and I thought, ‘Well, maybe this will help. Maybe this will fix the pain.’ And I did it and someone noticed. And it was a cry for help. But then I started doing it in places no one could see. And then it was no longer a cry for help.”

The disorder is so much a part of teen culture that there’s even a social scale involved. Kids who cut themselves, but not deeply, are scorned as mere “attention-seekers” and mocked by their peers, some teenage girls told me.

But cutting isn’t just among teenagers. It affects adults, too. The Cornell study indicated that self-injury crosses racial and economic lines and affects men as well as women, though men may do so by deliberately picking fights or punching themselves instead of cutting.

One woman told me she was a stay-at-home mom, living in a big house in Anaheim Hills, when she started cutting herself at age 38. Although she and her husband had become millionaires in the tech-stock boom, she felt desperately unhappy and didn't know why.

With a perfect figure, great kids and a stable marriage, she recalls feeling her unhappiness had to be her own fault. "We had tons of money. We were millionaires," she said.

Adding to her misery was a recent accident suffered by her younger sister, which left her severely brain damaged.

To distract herself from the pain, she started cutting herself with her shaving razor in the bathtub. She never told anyone and hid the scars. Her awareness that it was considered mostly a teenage activity only added to the shame she felt.

"I just wanted to feel the pain," she said. "You could see the blood and feel a sting and then you have an emotional release. All the emotions are released when you see the blood and feel the pain. It takes the emotions in your head and calms them down."

She remembers cutting herself about twice a week, always in the bathtub, for six months. Then, she started therapy and realized she was in an abusive marriage.

Once she felt released from the pressure of having to be perfect, she was able to stop cutting herself. She hasn't cut now for 13 years and doesn't think she'll ever go back to it, now that she's found a way to express her emotions instead of acting them out.

"I was pretending so hard we had the perfect family, I was fake," she said. "Society shows you everyone being perfect and happy and, if you're not, you wonder what's wrong with you. When I went to therapy, it was to figure out what was wrong with me. I live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood. It must be my fault."

So, how do people recover from self-injury? Most need therapy to deal with the underlying issues that led them to hurt themselves. And any ongoing abuse – sexual, physical or emotional – needs to stop.

Young people who are cutting should be taken to a doctor immediately, to rule out risk of suicide and to begin the process of recovery. Go to an emergency room if no appointment is available in a timely manner.

Parents can help their children by making sure the lines of communication are open. If they suspect self-injury, they should discuss this in a loving, supportive manner that is free of judgment:

"I noticed cuts or injuries on your arm. Can you tell me how that happened? I've heard some teenagers were harming themselves. I wondered if that's what you were doing," Turakhia suggested.

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