

On Tuesday, November 10, teacher Cheri Gilbert invited Heritage Campus Life Director, Ashley Sigafoose, and her co-worker, Ashley Hazel, to her 8th grade health classes to lead a discussion on self-injury (self-abuse, self-harm, self-mutilation, cutting, etc.).

This is a growing trend among our teenagers and can follow a person well into their adult years. We wanted to make parents aware of what self-injury is, talk about some signs to look for, and provide resources for further information and help.

Self-injury shows up in many forms. The most common being cutting, where a person will take a sharp object and intentionally injure themselves by using the object to scratch or cut their skin. It can also include burning, pulling one's hair out, banging one's head against hard objects, and anything else that intentionally causes pain and physical damage to a one's own body. Most cutters cut on their arms, legs, and torsos where they can hide the scars better.

1% of the population is self-abusing or has in the past—about 2 million people. 14-39% of American teenagers, both male and female, self-injure. This is a hard statistic to truly pinpoint because it is such a secretive behavior.

Cutters generally don't know how to cope with their emotions and they cut for several reasons:

- It is a way to relieve emotional stress that a person has allowed to build up inside.
- It is also a way to express negative emotions such as anger, guilt, and fear.
- Cutting is a way for a person to have control over one portion of their lives when the rest of their lives feel out of control. (Much like an anorexic with food).
- It allows them to feel "something" because they often feel numb and empty.
- It is also used as a form of punishment when they feel they don't measure up to their own or other's expectations.

Those who cut are usually not suicidal. Many people believe cutters are trying to kill themselves; however, they cut because they want to live. It is a way to express and manage their internal pain, not end it all. Cutters can accidentally kill themselves if the cut too deep, they hit the wrong vein or the wound gets an infection, so any cutting needs to be taken very seriously. (www.helpguide.org/mental/self_injury.htm).

There are several signs your teen may be self-injuring themselves:

- They wear only long-sleeved shirts or pants, even in hot weather.
- Even when they can explain the incidents, you notice an increase in the number of injuries your child has on their skin, especially cuts.
- There are unexplained cuts and scratches on their skin.
- They associate with friends who cut.
- You find a sharp object among your teen's possession that you wouldn't expect to see there.
- They begin to withdraw from their family, their friends, and /or their favorite activities.

- They become increasingly irritable and impulsive.
- They are constantly covering their arms, legs, hands, and wrists.
- They exhibit a low self-esteem.

Here's how you can help your teen:

- **Don't** react with shock, anger, fear, or other extreme emotion. Your teen is already struggling to manage their emotions. If you react harshly, they then have to try and manage that emotion too.
- **Don't** deny there is a problem or assume it is only a "phase." Some adults are cutting well into their mid-60's.
- **Don't** ask what you did as a parent for them to act this way.
- **Don't** try and hide sharp objects. If your child wants to cut, he or she will find a way.
- **Do** admit you and your child need help. You need to talk about this with a counselor.
- **Do** support your child and affirm their emotions they are feeling, without affirming the action of self-abuse.
- **Do** take the self-injury very seriously and realize they are not just seeking attention. Cutting is often a silent cry for help.
- **Do** immediately seek some sort of treatment for your teen.

Last of all, we would like to provide some resources for you and your child. Many of the stats for the class presentation and this posting also come from these resources.

To learn more about self-injury and about safer alternatives visit:

www.selfinjury.com

www.selfharm.org

www.twloha.com

To find treatment or a counseling center visit:

www.aacc.net

www.therapistlocator.net

** Every child in East Allen County is provided with a couple of free counseling sessions through the Bowen Center. Contact Heritage's Guidance department for more information.

**Life Works: Counseling & Consulting, Inc.

260-432-0066

To watch a video on one family's journey with self-injury:

www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=1685562n&tag=related;photovideo

If you have any questions for Ashley Sigafoose, please feel free to contact her at heritagecampuslife@hotmail.com or call her at the Cornerstone Youth Center at 623-3972.