

In *15-Minute Focus: Self-Harm and Self-Injury: When Emotional Pain Becomes Physical*, author Leigh Bagwell offers an in-depth look at the who, what, and why of self-harm; more accurately called nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI).

Students today face stressors on an unprecedented scale. From unstable world events to unsteady family situations, the external and internal pressures they experience can become overwhelming, and some turn to self-harm (NSSI) as a means to cope. On the outside, such behavior confuses and disturbs many people, even the teachers and parents who are closest to students. This book provides the research and perspective adults need to help kids who turn to NSSI as a means of dealing with their distress.

In this book, you'll discover:

- Types of NSSI behavior, including cutting, biting, hair pulling, and bruising
- The relationship between self-harm (NSSI) and suicidal ideation
- Signs and symptoms of NSSI beyond wounds and scars
- Myths and truths about NSSI
- Protocols for schools to follow when NSSI is suspected
- How parents and schools can partner to help students in need

This book features stories from students as they explain NSSI from their experiences, giving adults an inside look into the lives of those who struggle with this behavior. Also included are online resources that counselors and teachers can utilize, including infographics, NSSI assessments, and calming behaviors for use in place of self-harm.



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led transformational work in school counseling throughout the state through the revision of the school counseling model and standards, the creation of a regional peer-support network, and the launch of a dedicated communications channel for counselors, supervisors, and administrators.

In addition to her work in Tennessee, Leigh has shared her experiences and knowledge with school counselors and school counseling leaders in Georgia, Texas, Kentucky, and Iowa as well as working with the American School Counselor Association. She is currently working on her doctorate in Counselor Education and Supervision at the University of Tennessee. Her experience includes working as a school counselor and school counselor supervisor in both suburban and urban school districts.

Working alongside experts in various fields of mental health, the *15-Minute Focus* series is designed to home in on a specific mental health topic, signs to look for, practical intervention and classroom management strategies, and effective ways to communicate and collaborate with internal staff, outside referrals, and student families.



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**See page 75 for information about Downloadable Resources.**

# Introduction

*I am not ashamed of my scars. I refuse to be. Most are discreet, but sometimes they get noticed. In the early years, when there were fresh ones in various states of healing, I would scoff when someone asked, "What happened?" My responses varied from the barely believable: "I was attacked by a cat" to "It's a long story." It frustrated me how many people seemed oblivious to the epidemic of self-harm. Are that many people truly ignorant, or is it just more comfortable to accept what is an obvious lie and move on? -*

- Margot

Self-harm

Self-injury

Self-abuse

Self-mutilation

It may be hard to imagine that someone would willingly choose to inflict pain upon themselves. It may be harder to imagine that they believe inflicting pain upon themselves actually makes them feel better.

For students who engage in self-injury, the physical pain their action creates pales in relation to the emotional pain they are experiencing. That is why they harm themselves. They are seeking relief. They are looking to escape. They want their body to bear the burden of their pain instead of their heart. The challenge is that the physical pain may bring some relief but it rarely lasts long.

Our students need our help. They need us to care about both their bodies and their hearts. They do not need us to agree with their choices to harm themselves; rather, they need us to understand

their pain. In this book, we will discuss what behaviors are considered to be self-injurious. We will identify reasons why our students are engaging in self-harm. We will highlight approaches that we as educators can utilize to teach our students appropriate coping strategies, as well as interventions to address the root causes of their pain.



# 1

## What Is Self-Harm or Self-Injury?

Self-Injury has been previously known as self-harm or self-mutilation. As mental health professionals learned more about these behaviors, they have been more appropriately termed as Nonsuicidal Self-Injury (NSSI). This is a more accurate description of intention and purpose of these behaviors. NSSI is the act of directly and intentionally damaging one's own body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not aligned to cultural expectations or norms.

NSSI should be recognized as a maladaptive coping mechanism. Students often view the harmful behaviors as a coping strategy. Although there is potential for long-term injury, NSSI provides an immediate escape from overwhelming anxiety or stress. Students engage in self-harm to temporarily relieve themselves of intense negative emotions. They report that when they have strong uncomfortable feelings, NSSI lessens the emotional pain and brings feelings of calm and release. Whereas other students may express their emotions through tantrums, screaming, hurting others, and damaging property, students who engage in NSSI have learned to regulate those uncomfortable feelings by inflicting physical pain on their bodies.

Some students can become so overcome with troubling feelings that they often experience an emotional detachment. NSSI is a way for them to begin to "feel" something again. The physical pain serves as a catalyst for accessing the emotional pain that has become numb. Other students engage in NSSI as a form of

*Stress Can Really Get on Your Nerves* is a great resource for teaching students about identifying and managing stress. *Fighting Invisible Tigers* by Earl Hipp is another great resource for helping high school students cope with daily stressors and reduce risky behaviors such as self-injury.

# STRESS MANAGEMENT IN YOUR LIFE

MEDITATION	EXERCISE	TIME IN NATURE	
			
DEEP BREATHS	GET MOVING	RELAXATION	
SLEEP WELL	CONNECT SOCIALLY	EAT WELL	MAKE LISTS
			
RECHARGE	JOIN A CLUB	REDUCE CAFFEINE	PRIORITIZE TASKS

<https://www.mtu.edu/well-being/resources/stress-management/>  
Michigan Tech Center for Student Mental Health and Well-being

## Training for Staff

A key component of self-injury prevention and intervention is education and training. When teachers know more about NSSI, they can be better advocates for their students who may be engaging in it. School counselors can facilitate these trainings with the other medical and mental health providers in the school, such as the school nurse,