

Biblical Counseling Center publishes eCounselor's Weekly guide, to encourage counselors and all believers in discipleship and daily growth.

Why Hurt Yourself on Purpose?

By Jeff Temple, M.A.

Why do people intentionally inflict pain on themselves? It seems so abnormal and causes such great confusion for those who love them. But those who injure themselves purposely have a logical and reasonable explanation for that behavior, they think.



Take for example Alex, in his forties and recently married. He punches himself when arguing with his new wife. He violently punches himself in the face until he is exhausted or his blood trickles out. He would explain it is better that he hits himself than to take his anger out on Sandra whom he loves and adores. It makes perfect sense to him.

Another example is Kirsten. On the outside she seems like an average teen who experiences typical peer pressure. But after particularly hard days at school she quietly goes to her bathroom, takes a razor and cuts herself in inconspicuous places on her body. If you were to ask why she cuts she would say it helps her to deal with the stress of trying to fit in with the crowd, releasing her emotions with the flowing blood.

What do the man and the teen girl have in common? Both are trying to cope with uncontrollable emotions, intolerable situations, and longing for peace.

Combating uncontrollable emotions

Both Alex and Kirsten are trying to cap their raging emotions that each feels will consume them. For Alex it is rage. For Kirsten it is insecurity and deep bitterness. They believe they will go crazy if they don't silence the emotions that blare like a siren and they know of no other way to silence them. With temporary relief, they become addicted to the path that gives that momentary pleasure and comfort – self-injury.

Combating intolerable problems

Alex's rage appears after fights with his insecure wife. Her insecurities lead to accusations and nagging. He can't convince her of his innocence no matter how rational his explanations appear. This is when he becomes violent, taking his anger out on his own body.

Kirsten wants the admiration and approval of others, especially boys. She views herself as ugly and fat and is convinced no matter what she does she is homely and undesirable. She cannot bear the intolerable emotions. So she cuts again and again, hoping to control what she cannot control.

Longing to have peace and feel better

Alex and Kirsten's acts of self-injury are attempts to regain tranquility from rampaging emotions. Their minds are quieted, but for only a moment. The peace they temporarily enjoy will not last because the peace they crave cannot come by acts of man, including self-injury. The blood that flows from their own veins cannot do what only the blood of Christ that flowed from His veins has already done – to pay the sinner's price for peace once and for all.

The only peace that lasts comes from the living God. To find such a haven both Alex and Kirsten will have to set their eyes not on their circumstances that provoke the emotional upheavals they experience, but on the sovereign God who is powerful to save. Only that which is greater can conquer something as great as self-injury.

Ps 46 is where self-injurers can find solace. This psalm depicts what Alex and Kirsten each feel. Verses 1-3 describe the circumstances that threaten to rock their world. But God is in their midst and cannot be shaken. He is their rock, refuge, and strength when they are in trouble. It is He who provides what they need during the storms of their lives.

In Ps 46:4-7 the *River of Peace flows from the Temple of God*, with healing waters spilling into the surging seas of Alex's and Kirsten's lives and emotions. This river flows in contrast to the raging sea and is the picture of God bringing life to replace their own destruction (Ezek 47:1-12). The emotions Alex and Kirsten experience must be confronted by the peace of God that surpasses all understanding (Php 4:7) if they are to break free from the sin of self-injury. God's redemptive peace must replace their own destructive efforts of self-redemption.

In Ps 46:8-9 an invitation is extended to see how the Lord has redeemed his people in the past, and to gain hope of what He will do again. Then God points to His reason for intervening – redemption and worship (:10). Trust in Him establishes a lasting peace that comes from knowing that the Lord God is in our midst (:11). He alone is our hope.

"Be still and know that I am God." - Ps 46:1

Self-injurers must first recognize their own attempts of self-redemption. Only as they recognize past fruitless attempts to gain peace through the shedding of blood (their own) can they truly gain peace through Christ's shed blood that forgives sin and enables them to grow in Christ-likeness. As they progress in sanctification they will no longer feel a need to cope with troubling emotions by self-injury.

Biblical Counseling Center

[Main Office](#) • 3233 N Arlington Heights Rd, Suite 302 Arlington Heights, IL 60004

[Scherverville Office](#) • 833 W Lincoln Hwy, Suite 115W Scherverville, Indiana 46375

[Fox Lake Office](#) • Fox Lake Community Church, 25 W Big Hollow Road Fox lake, Illinois 60020

Email info@biblicalcounselingcenter.org • Telephone (847) 398-7193

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