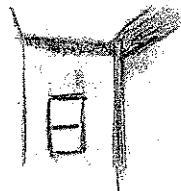


10. Have you ever had to seek medical attention for your injuries? What happened? How were you treated by the medical professionals? Did you reveal how you really obtained your injuries?

The answers to these questions will be very helpful to you in understanding some of the ways by which you hurt yourself. Understanding how you inflict your injuries is a necessary step in beginning to change these behaviors.

The next chapter will give you a deeper understand of some of the reasons people engage in SIV.



CHAPTER 2

Why Do People Engage in Self-Inflicted Violence?

Why would someone purposefully and willfully hurt him- or herself? You may have asked yourself this question many times. If you are open about your self-injuries, you have probably even had to respond to this question frequently in answering inquisitive friends and family members. Whether or not you have tried to answer this question, you may not have a clear understanding of why you hurt yourself. This chapter presents some of the possible reasons why you engage in acts of self-inflicted violence.

Molly is a thirty-four-year-old lawyer who lives in Southern California. She has been cutting her arms for the past eighteen years, approximately twice a year. On these infrequent occasions, she generally makes only one or two small cuts on her upper arms. Molly hasn't told any of her friends or family that she hurts herself. The one time a coworker noticed and ask about Molly's wounds, Molly told him that she had been injured while trying to clip her cat's claws.

Molly isn't sure why she cuts herself. She describes her desire to cut as being like the desire to sleep—cutting feels like a need rather than simply a want. Molly feels a sense of relief and release after injuring herself. She feels more complete, whole, and at peace.

Like many people who hurt themselves, Molly is not readily able to recognize the motivations for her behaviors. She is, however, better able to identify her internal states and the results of her actions.

The reasons presented in this chapter are those *most commonly* cited when people explain why they hurt themselves. If you don't see your explanation listed, it doesn't mean your reason isn't valid. This chapter covers many, but by no means all, of the reasons you might hurt yourself.

Before reading further, take some time to complete activity 2.1, which will help you identify the reasons you engage in SIV.

Activity 2.1: Why Do I Hurt Myself?

This activity is the first step in gaining a better understanding of why you injure yourself, and it will lay the groundwork for changing this behavior (assuming you want to). In trying to change any habit or behavior, it's important to go back to the reasons why it occurs and try to alter the cause of the act. For instance, if you smoke cigarettes when you're stressed, changing the amount of stress you feel should change your desire to smoke. The same principle applies to SIV. So the first step in changing your SIV behaviors is to find out why they occur in the first place.

Write your responses to the following questions in your journal. In answering these questions, try to be as specific as you can. There are no right or wrong answers. The idea is simply to brainstorm as many possible things that are related to your SIV as you can. Even if you're not sure your answers are accurate, write them down anyway. Begin by thinking back to a time when you hurt yourself—a recent episode of SIV or an episode from a while ago.

1. What did you do? Describe this particular episode of SIV.
2. What were you feeling emotionally and physically right before you hurt yourself? Were you angry? Depressed? Sad? Numb?
3. What thoughts were going through your mind before this incident? Were you thinking that your life was a mess? That you were a failure? That no one cared about you?
4. What was happening prior to your hurting yourself? Had you had an argument with a friend? Had you been fired from your job? Had you been standing in a long line at the bank? What, if any, was the particular event that led up to this act of SIV?
5. What did you hope the SIV would do for you? Give you a way to release your pent up feelings? Get you some special attention? Make you feel more whole or more real? How did you think it would help?
6. Did the SIV help you in the way that you expected?

Relief from Feelings

As mentioned in chapter 1, one of the more common goals of SIV is to feel better at a time when you are emotionally overwhelmed. Most often, when

people hurt themselves they are trying to relieve intense emotions and get some relief from tremendous internal psychic pressure. At times, such overwhelming emotions can seem uncontrollable, frightening, and dangerous. You may feel disorganized, disoriented, and as if your head might explode at any second. During these times it may appear as though there is no way to escape these feelings except to hurt yourself.

People who injure themselves often aren't able to regulate or control their emotions well. You may find it difficult to identify, express, or release your emotions. If you're like most adolescents and adults who hurt themselves, you never developed the ability to feel and experience emotions as others do: by crying, yelling, or screaming. Or you may not have been allowed to show or release your true emotions. Yet your feelings still exist, whether you show them or not. You may have adopted SIV as a strategy for getting relief from these intense feelings.

There are numerous reasons why you may not have developed a more typical way of releasing your emotions. It may have been unsafe—physically or psychologically—for you to express your feelings within your environment. For example, a common saying has it that "big boys don't cry." Perhaps in your family you were punished every time you shed a tear, and so you learned that you shouldn't show anyone your real feelings. Or maybe the expression of your feelings was ignored, denied, or disputed, any of which could certainly have a psychological impact. For instance, let's say that your mother was two hours late picking you up from school and you had to stand outside in the rain while you waited. When your mother finally arrived at the school, you got in the car, slammed the door, and told your mother that you were really angry that she had been so late. If your mother ignored you (by not responding to what you had said), disregarded your feelings (made a joke or said, "Well, you'll live," which you interpreted as, "So what if you're mad; I don't care"), or disputed your emotions (by saying, for example, "You're not really mad, you're just tired"), you probably would have been left with the impression that your feelings didn't matter. Once you believe that your feelings are not important to others, you are more likely to refrain from expressing them in a typical or direct way, by talking, crying, yelling, and so on.

A second reason you may not have developed a more common way of releasing your feelings has to do with the people around you. If your parents or other people you grew up around were not able to express their own emotions safely and directly, by talking, for example, you may not have been able to learn that method because you didn't see it demonstrated. Or if your parents physically fought each other when they were angry, you may have assumed that violence is a good way of expressing these feelings. Alternatively, you may have seen someone else you know using alcohol or drugs relieve feelings of depression or anxiety. In the same way that learning to read, write, or tie your shoes requires an instructor, learning how to appropriately express or relieve your emotions must be taught, either explicitly or by example (preferably both). If the people around you did not

show you or teach you how to release your feelings in a typical or healthy manner, you wouldn't have been able to learn that skill.

A third reason you might have chosen SIV as a method to relieve your feelings also has to do with the behaviors of those close to you. As mentioned in chapter 1, if you saw others using SIV to release their feelings, you may have simply mimicked their behaviors. If you watch someone hurt him- or herself, and the results seem beneficial you might just try it yourself. This modeling of behavior is fairly common in such settings as jails, prisons, and inpatient psychiatric hospitals.

Whatever your reason for using self-inflicted violence to release overwhelming emotions, the effect is the same: Imagine that you are a can of soda. You're sitting there in your refrigerator, having a perfectly fine day, when suddenly something occurs that shakes you up—an earthquake, a passing truck, a mischievous kid; you don't know what. All you do know at this point is that you're very uncomfortable, feeling as if you're about to explode. If you think about it, you know that if you just wait, the feelings will pass and the tension will lessen. But because the tension at the moment is so extreme, you feel the need to pop your top. So you do this. This physical change gives you relief, but the price of this relief is extreme. You have behaved in a manner that changes you permanently.

People typically report that before engaging in an act of self-inflicted violence, they feel isolated, alienated, depressed, and frustrated. Whatever the source of the feelings—an event, a memory, or some unknown cause—they combine to create an uncomfortable level of tension and distress, which you must somehow escape or lessen. SIV helps you to reduce these negative feelings and offers a temporary escape from the seemingly unbearable tension.

Marge describes the way that SIV helps her to ease her feelings like this: "Have you ever seen that magic trick where the magician takes a dollar from someone in the audience and rips it into a hundred pieces? Then he does some kind of hocus-pocus thing, and presto, the dollar is whole again. Before I cut, I feel like that dollar that that's ripped in a hundred pieces. By the time I finish, it's like, presto, I'm whole again. That's why I cut; I get to feel whole again."

Marge is clearly using SIV to reduce her feelings of disorganization and tension—to get rid of her negative feelings and feel more whole and complete. If you're like most people, you have experienced a time when you felt really bad. During these times you just don't feel like yourself; instead you feel fragmented, tense, or empty. SIV helps decrease these negative feelings by providing an outlet for these emotions. It also creates a physical wound—as opposed to an emotional wound—which can later be nurtured and healed. The bottom line is that SIV makes you feel better, at least in the short term. Part of the reason self-inflicted violence is so difficult to stop is that at the moment you are distressed it is very effective at relieving your feelings.

Take some time now to look at how you typically handle your feelings by completing activity 2.2.

Activity 2.2: Dealing with Emotions

This exercise will help you understand how you handle your emotions. There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. However, your answers should give you an idea of the ways that you regulate and express your feelings and how they might contribute to your SIV behaviors. After each question a brief explanation is given that relates your answer to possible reasons you hurt yourself.

1. Are you direct in how you express your emotions? For example, when you are angry with someone do you tell them? Or do you keep your feelings to yourself? Or do you snap or lash out at other people because you're feeling so mad?
Expressing your feelings in ways that are direct—such as talking about what you're feeling or confronting the situation that is making you emotional—will help you release your feelings in a more positive manner. Keeping your feelings to yourself or releasing them in inappropriate ways—such as yelling at your spouse when you're really angry at your daughter—will not help you get rid of the underlying emotions. These emotions will eat at you until you have to use an extreme measure like SIV to feel some relief.
2. When you are feeling intense emotions, do you prefer to be alone or with others? Does this differ with different emotions?
Although it may be difficult for you to be with others when you are feeling intense emotions, doing so gives you a way to release your emotions and feel connected to others. Without this release and connection, you are likely to feel overwhelmed, alone, and helpless—all feelings which can lead to SIV.
3. When your emotions are intense, do you cry, scream, or release your feelings in some similar way?
Crying, screaming, yelling, or similar methods of releasing emotions can prevent you from feeling overwhelmed. When you are able to release your emotions, you are less likely to want to hurt yourself.
4. Do you try to find ways to escape rather than deal with feelings or problems directly? For instance, if you are really stressed at work, do you quit your job rather than trying to work things out?
Sometimes it's necessary to avoid feelings or problems. However, if you do this on a consistent basis, you are setting a pattern of instability and allowing fear to run your life. Generally, you don't try to avoid those things that don't scare you. Learning how to

confront whatever it is that scares you will help you deal with your feelings effectively. When you are able to do this, you won't feel the desire to hurt yourself as strongly.

A Method of Coping

No one likes to feel bad or enjoys being in pain. In fact, we will go to great lengths to avoid pain and negative emotions. However, sometimes all our efforts at averting these disturbing sensations just don't work. At times, each of us feels bad. When we do, we generally try to use a coping mechanism to help get through these moments. We all have ways to contend with the pressures of the world. And the more difficult the situation, the more extreme the coping mechanism needs to be. For many of us, learning effective ways of coping is a long and difficult process. So when we find one that works, we're likely to use it a great deal. It is essential that we have and use these methods of coping so that we can function in the world and remain psychologically healthy.

All creatures have methods of coping. Coping is simply a behavior that is used to get through a difficult situation as well and as easily as possible—a survival tactic. Dogs bark when they feel scared, overwhelmed, or threatened (and sometimes if they're hungry). Opossum play dead when they fear danger. Humans too have established specific ways of coping, some of which are innate. When stressors get too great, our bodies are programmed to fight back. We sleep when we're physically or psychologically exhausted. Our heart rate and blood flow increase when we feel frightened, in case we need to react quickly.

Humans have a physiological reaction to stress, regardless of whether the stress which we experience stems from a physical, emotional, or psychological source. Some of these stressors may be ordinary, daily events (such as a traffic jam on the way to work); some will be extraordinary (such as an unexpected death or loss). Regardless of the source of the stress, we are programmed to try to defend ourselves—physically and psychologically—against these feelings. Sometimes the ways we defend ourselves are extreme, seemingly more severe than the original stressor. Self-inflicted violence is one example of such an extreme method. Nonetheless, its purpose is to help us through difficult times.

The way that SIV functions as a coping mechanism is complex. At first glance it seems odd or contradictory that SIV would be useful as a method of coping. As a coping mechanism self-inflicted violence is unique in that it is one of the few methods that also causes physical injury. It makes little sense logically that physical injury can provide a sense of relief. Yet, as you know, hurting yourself does just that—it provides a relief or lessening of uncomfortable physical or psychological sensations, and in that way it becomes a method you use to cope. The physical injuries force your body to employ its own coping strategies to deal with the pain and physical damage

created by the SIV, as discussed in chapter 1. In this sense, although SIV is an effective strategy of temporarily dealing with psychological factors, it also creates additional situations—both physical and psychological—with which you must contend, such as physical trauma, shame, and guilt.

For each of us, various areas of our lives cause enough tension, stress, anxiety, and frustration that we can begin to feel overwhelmed. Traffic, long lines, finances, work, school, relationships, family problems, and many other areas in each of our lives present the opportunity for great stress or tension. And each of us has his or her own specific way of getting through the day. You may use SIV to help you cope, while your best friend goes to the gym and exercises. You may have another friend who uses drugs or alcohol when she gets overwhelmed. Maybe you even know someone who gets in fights as a way to feel better. There are many ways to cope with the pressures of life.

While all methods of coping help you to feel better (at least temporarily), some methods work better in the long run or have fewer negative "side effects." Generally, positive or healthy forms of coping (in moderation) will help you to feel better without producing results that could be harmful. Talking, exercising, writing, crying, breathing, doing artwork, and solving the underlying problem are all forms of positive, or healthy coping.

Behaviors that cause you further harm (immediately or in the long run) or that put you in a dangerous or uncomfortable position are considered negative or unhealthy coping strategies. Some examples of negative coping techniques include using drugs or alcohol, violent behavior toward others, overeating, gambling, smoking, and self-inflicted violence. Self-inflicted violence is a negative, or unhealthy coping strategy because it causes definite physical damage and possible psychological difficulties. So, while SIV is an effective method of coping and its use may even prevent you from behaving in a more drastic or destructive way (such as trying to kill yourself), learning to use other, positive coping strategies in your time of need will serve you well. These methods of coping and how to practice and use them will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7. For now, activity 2.3 will help you explore the various coping methods you currently use.

Activity 2.3: How Do I Cope?

This activity will help you identify some of the ways you cope. Identifying as many of your coping strategies as you can now will help you later when you may need to use one of those strategies.

In the following list, circle each of the coping mechanisms that you use. Write any others that you use in the space provided.

Sleeping	Crying
Screaming	Walking
Talking	Exercising

Drawing _____
 Drinking _____
 Using drugs _____
 Smoking _____
 Shopping _____
 Gambling _____

Painting _____
 Eating _____
 Sex _____
 Meditating _____
 SIV _____
 Working _____

Now spend a few minutes thinking about why you use these methods of coping. Do particular coping techniques work for particular emotions or stressors? For example, does smoking help you feel better when you're really stressed and shopping work better when you're sad?

Using the coping techniques that you identified above, create a two-column table in your journal: In the left column of this table list each of the coping techniques you use; in the right column, list which specific emotion that technique helps with the most. The table should look something like this:

Coping Technique	Emotion Helped Most
running	anxiety (from my job)
talking (with my therapist)	sadness

When you are finished you will probably find that certain ways you cope correspond with certain feelings you experience. This information will be helpful when you are learning how to stop hurting yourself.

Now let's look at SIV specifically. You may have already listed SIV above. For most people who engage in SIV, it helps them feel better and cope with life more effectively—on a short-term basis. In your journal record all of the ways SIV helps you to cope. In other words, how does it make you feel better?

For example, a young man named Jason describes his experience like this:

I feel like there's something rotting inside of me that's eating at me from the inside. I cut myself to get this rotten thing out of me, like it seeps out with the blood. Afterwards I feel clean and calm. I feel better.

For Jason, SIV helps to create a sense of calmness and inner peace, helping him cope with these terrible feelings.

Stopping, Inducing, or Preventing Dissociation

The word *dissociation* is used to describe a psychological state in which the individual experiences an alteration in consciousness, memory, and sometimes identity. During a dissociative episode, some people feel detached from their bodies. They may feel a floating sensation or a sensation similar to a hypnotic state. Many people also report a sense that they are actually separated from their bodies, and are watching themselves much as if they were watching a movie. Some people are able to dissociate to such an extent that they actually create separate identities, with separate lives, different abilities, and even differing physical characteristics.

Everyone dissociates to some extent; however, for most, dissociation is fairly mild. Some examples of typical dissociation include driving past your freeway exit, tuning out when someone is talking to you, or forgetting the page of a book you just read. As you can see, dissociation exists on a continuum, from mild to extreme. Each of us experiences this spaced-out state to some degree.

Although everyone dissociates to some degree, some people use dissociation as a defense mechanism, to protect them from overwhelming emotional or physical pain. However, sometimes these dissociative states themselves become overwhelming, due either to intensity or duration. Self-inflicted violence is one method used to reduce, prevent, or end a disturbing dissociative state.

It works like this: The state of high tension that precedes SIV tends to alter consciousness, often sending the person into a dissociated state in which physical pain and sensation is reduced. You have probably experienced the sensation of feeling numb or zoned out prior to hurting yourself. You may lose track of time or be unaware of your environment. And you may desire these zoned-out, dissociative feelings because they give you relief from emotional pain. You might even experience this dissociative state as quite calm or peaceful.

However, other people have precisely the opposite perception of dissociation. For some dissociation is very uncomfortable. The loss of connection with others (or sometimes with reality) and control over your own level of consciousness can be particularly frightening and alienating.

When you're in that spaced-out, dissociated state, your awareness of even yourself is extremely limited. Dissociation conflicts with self-awareness. But by doing things to increase your self-awareness you correspondingly decrease dissociation. SIV, which draws attention back to your physical being, is quite effective in increasing self-awareness, and in doing so helps to reduce or end a dissociative state.

Margaret is a twenty-three-year-old graduate student. She describes her self-injurious behavior as follows:

I have a hard time remembering many of the times I cut myself. All my memories become confused and melded together. Backgrounds switch, but the actions remain the same. I'm in the bathroom, looking into the mirror, staring into my own eyes. I don't know what I see. After minutes, hours, days (I lose track of the time), I pick up the razor blade and cut myself. I watch myself bleed with the same detachment as looking into my own reflection. I feel no pain, only the warmth of the blood trickling down my arm. The water makes the blood thin and spread. I use toilet paper to wrap my wounds and stop the bleeding. The pressure on my cuts stings, but also feels good. I can feel. I have survived.

By engaging in SIV, Margaret is able to end a dissociative episode and begin to feel again. Her experience is not rare. Many people report high levels of dissociation before and during an act of SIV. Changing your physical sensations through SIV serves to reduce the amount of dissociation you experience. Conversely, dissociation can also serve to reduce the experience of physical pain caused by the self-inflicted injury. In addition, for some people high levels of tension are so unbearable that they turn to SIV as a way to induce dissociation, and thus escape the emotional pain.

In its most severe form, dissociation can lead to alterations of identity, as in cases of dissociative identity disorder (formerly called multiple personality disorder). If you have multiple personalities, you may be particularly disturbed by these dissociated states, as they reduce the amount of control you have over which personalities surface. Inflicting self-injury is one method used to avoid, gain control over, or end this alteration of consciousness. Self-inflicted violence changes the physical sensations associated with dissociation, averting or disrupting this state.

As you can see, the role of dissociation before an act of SIV is complex. Some people hurt themselves in order to dissociate and thus relieve discomfort. Others use SIV as a way to eliminate or reduce a state of dissociation. In either case what is exceedingly clear is that dissociation does have a strong relationship with self-inflicted violence.

During the actual act of self-injury, dissociation takes on a simpler role. At this stage, dissociation mainly serves to block or reduce the perception of physical pain. In this altered state of consciousness it is much more difficult to experience physical sensations. You may have heard of people who successfully use hypnosis as an anesthetic during surgery. Hypnosis, like dissociation, alters typical conscious states, changing perceptions and sensations. Dissociation is particularly adept at altering the level of physical pain experienced during SIV.

However, high levels of dissociation can increase the physical risk associated with self-inflicted violence. In a highly dissociated state, some people lose awareness of the extent of injury they are inflicting. You may have had the experience of injuring yourself more severely than you had planned, later realizing that your wounds are more numerous or serious than you

had perceived while dissociated. So the masking of physical pain experienced during SIV can have detrimental results.

After an episode of self-injury, the level of dissociation decreases. You experience a return to typical levels of consciousness relatively soon after injuring yourself. Sometimes this return to normal alertness is necessary so that your injuries can be treated. The decrease in dissociation also reflects the effectiveness of the SIV. Given that one of the main functions of SIV is to make you feel better, once this has occurred, the necessity to remain in a state of altered consciousness no longer exists. In short, when self-inflicted violence has served its purpose, dissociation is no longer necessary. Self-inflicted violence allows you to temporarily cope, tolerate, or reduce your overwhelming negative emotions and simultaneously control your level of dissociation.

Activity 2.4: How Much Do I Dissociate?

This exercise will help you assess the role dissociation plays in your life. As was mentioned before, all people dissociate to some degree, and dissociation is a very useful mechanism to deal with overwhelming situations.

Rate yourself on the following questions by circling the appropriate number in the scale following each question.

- I feel detached from my body:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often
- I feel as if I am watching myself (as if in a movie):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often
- I lose track of time:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often
- I find things in my possession that I have no recollection of picking up (or obtaining in some manner):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often
- I am unable to remember important events in my life:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often
- I am unable to remember large chunks of time:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Never					Sometimes				Very often

7. I feel as if people, things, and the world in general are not real:
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|-----------|---|---|---|---|------------|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Never | | | Sometimes | | | | | Very often | |
8. I can't remember whether I actually said or did something or just thought about it:
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|-----------|---|---|---|---|------------|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Never | | | Sometimes | | | | | Very often | |
9. I become so absorbed in reading, watching television, or daydreaming that I don't notice when someone is talking to me or trying to get my attention:
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|-----------|---|---|---|---|------------|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Never | | | Sometimes | | | | | Very often | |
10. I do not feel pain (or much pain) when I injure myself:
- | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|---|---|-----------|---|---|---|---|------------|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Never | | | Sometimes | | | | | Very often | |

Add together all of the numbers you have circled. Your score will be between 10 and 100. Higher scores indicate more extreme levels of dissociation. So, the closer your score is to 100, the higher your level of dissociation. Scores of 80 and above indicate extreme levels of dissociation. Scores below 30 indicate low levels of dissociation. Scores between 30 and 80 could be considered average.

Again, there are no right or wrong answers or scores here. This activity is simply designed to help you see the role dissociation plays in your life.

Euphoric Feelings

During an episode of self-inflicted violence, you are physically traumatizing your body. Your body reacts to this trauma by working to minimize the pain you experience and heal as quickly as possible.

Dissociation is part of this process. Another part is the way that your body reacts physically to alter your perception of pain. This process is accomplished with the help of naturally occurring chemicals found in your brain. When you experience physical trauma, your brain releases substances called endorphins, which have effects similar to those of morphine. (Morphine works as a painkiller because it mimics these naturally occurring chemicals.) During an episode of SIV, endorphins are released so that you don't feel the pain associated with hurting yourself.

Like morphine, endorphins can also cause a very pleasant physical sensation—and they can become addictive. Thus you may engage in self-inflicted violence in order to produce feelings of euphoria, and may begin to rely on this act in order to stimulate these pleasant sensations.

You may have noticed that you feel a tingling sensation before hurting yourself. Or you may notice a general feeling of peacefulness or glee while engaging in a self-injurious act. You may even feel sexually aroused during an act of SIV. It is likely that each of these experiences is the result of the increased level of endorphins in your body.

One of the problems of using self-inflicted violence to produce euphoric feelings is that, like morphine and other means used to elicit such feelings, this method loses its effectiveness rather quickly—a tolerance can be built up. Therefore, the euphoric feelings produced by these chemicals will not be as strong in subsequent acts as they were during the first episode of self-inflicted violence. You may even find yourself injuring yourself more severely in order to experience the same type of sensations you felt when you were first engaging in SIV.

Physically Expressing Pain

As mentioned earlier, many individuals who engage in self-inflicted violence have difficulty expressing emotional pain. Emotions are often hard to identify, and can be even more difficult to release. Perhaps you can remember a time in your life when you really felt like crying, but couldn't produce the tears. Or maybe you felt really angry and wanted to scream, but you didn't due to your environment. At times like these, you might use SIV as a method of expressing and releasing emotional tension and pain.

Robert, a twenty-year-old artist who burns himself with cigarettes, describes, "I have a hard time talking about what's going on inside me. When I start talking, all of the crap I'm saying sounds so lame. I like looking at the scars on my arms because I know that they're real. It's like I'm trying to say, I've suffered, man, just look."

The results of self-inflicted violence—often cuts, bruises, burns, or broken bones—serve as an expression of internal conflict. By being able to actually view and feel something tangible, you are able to give your internal experience external representation. In other words, you can see how much you hurt by making what's real inside your mind and body become real outside. Physically expressing your emotional pain allows you to have concrete evidence of intangible, amorphous, or indefinable emotions.

Several goals are associated with physical expression of emotional pain. The first of these is to provide confirmation or evidence that you are suffering psychologically. Often, individuals who engage in SIV tend to minimize or doubt their own internal experiences. There are many possible reasons why a person would not trust his or her own experiences, but most often it has to do with a lack of verification from others that those experiences are real.

This concept may seem a bit confusing, so here's an example. Imagine that it is six o'clock in the morning and you are just getting up to go to school or work or wherever. You take a shower, comb your hair, brush your teeth, get dressed, and do all your morning rituals. A typical morning,

right? OK, now imagine trying to do all of this while wearing specially made blinders, like racehorses sometimes wear, so that you are unable to see what you look like. You may think you put your clothes on correctly and combed your hair in the right direction, but you can't actually tell.

Now you step out of your house and face others. Their responses will tell you how good a job you did getting ready that morning. If you get strange stares, smirks, or all-out laughter, you know that your preparations didn't go quite as you hoped. If people stop and compliment you, you'll feel quite successful.

The point of this somewhat silly example is that others' responses are extremely important to our perceptions of our own experiences. We want those responses to match our experiences. When others respond in ways that are opposed to what we think or feel, we will begin to doubt ourselves.

If you doubt your own perceptions, it is likely that you did not get the kind of feedback you needed at critical times in your life, particularly in childhood. Receiving feedback from others that matches your experiences is sometimes referred to as *mirroring*. Through a lack of mirroring in your life, you may have developed a pattern of doubting your own internal experiences. By providing concrete evidence of your emotional pain, you can acknowledge, represent, and, in a way, mirror your own emotions. No one can question the gash on your arm. No one will doubt the cast on your leg. More importantly, through this physical expression, *you* will not doubt that your feelings are real and strong and painful.

Communication

Chris left her therapist's office feeling angry and abandoned. At the end of the session the therapist had mentioned that in the next month she would be taking off several weeks for vacation. Although her therapist had assured Chris that she would be able to contact another therapist in case of emergency, Chris didn't want her therapist to go. Chris felt as though she would fall apart without having her therapist to talk with and support her. Later that evening, Chris sliced her arms severely enough that she had to go to the hospital for stitches. From the hospital she called her therapist and left a message telling her about the SIV.

Sometimes SIV is used as a form of communication. Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, scars, wounds, and other visible signs of injury can also communicate a great deal. Your scars and wounds can express to others what you are thinking, feeling, or experiencing. In Chris's case, she was angry with her therapist and used SIV as a way of expressing her emotions. You may have difficulty expressing your feelings to others verbally, and, like Chris, you may use SIV to let those around you know what you are experiencing. Your friends may not realize the true level of your emotional or psychic pain until they see how you have chosen to represent this pain physically. (In fact, *you* may not realize the extent of your pain until you can see it physically.)

Although using SIV to communicate has serious drawbacks (such as shame, embarrassment, and the injury itself) it can be an effective way to express your needs, desires, and experiences to others. By exposing your pain and discomfort to others through SIV, you are more likely to receive what you need from them your friends and others. Without demonstrating a need for support or help, you probably will not receive them. In the example above, it is not likely that Chris's therapist canceled her vacation because Chris cut herself. However, it probably paved the way for a necessary conversation about Chris's fears, anger, and other feelings. Thus, by making your injuries visible, you may be trying to open lines of communication and precipitate a conversation about your experiences. You are indirectly showing others your inner world.

Chris used SIV as a way of expressing a fairly direct message: "I'm scared and angry that you're leaving me." But at times, self-inflicted violence is used to carry a symbolic message. For instance, you might injure yourself to create scars or wounds that mark a certain occasion; they become symbolic representations of that event. You may also self-injure to symbolically communicate to yourself the extent of your pain and your ability to survive. Although you may have no intention of showing others your wounds or scars, you create and witness evidence of your experience. Whether through symbols or more direct messages, SIV helps to create visible external representations of your feelings, and may allow you to communicate with others.

Self-inflicted violence undoubtedly sends many messages to others. But while SIV may be a potent form of communication, it may not always be effective. The meanings and messages behind an act of SIV may be misinterpreted. Fresh blood dripping from a newly opened wound makes a very powerful statement. However, like all forms of communication, the interpretation may not match the intended message.

When SIV is used as a method of communication, the intended messages generally reflect the great amount of psychic pain which the individual is experiencing: "I hurt." "I need help." "I'm in great pain." "I'm scared." All these statements reflect interpretations associated with self-injuries. However, interpretations such as "That person is crazy" or "She must be really nuts" or "He must have been trying to kill himself" may be made by others. Although it may be incredibly difficult, it might be wise to talk with friends about their understandings of what your self-injuries communicate. You may find that your intentions have been misinterpreted.

Often you will hear people talking about self-inflicted violence as an act of manipulation. Generally, manipulation is thought of in a negative sense. However, the fundamental meaning of the word is simply handling or controlling something. So SIV can be seen as an attempt to manipulate or control your environment—including the information you communicate to others—although the effectiveness of this method is limited by probable miscommunications.

We will return to the concept of control at the end of this chapter. For now, complete the following exercise, which will help you understand what you are intending to communicate through SIV.

Activity 2.5: What Does My SIV Communicate to Others?

In your journal, answer the following questions. You might want to think back to the last time you hurt yourself, because remembering a specific instance of SIV is easier than thinking of all your SIV episodes collectively.

1. If your injuries or scars could talk, what would they say?
2. To whom would they say these things?
3. How might these messages be misinterpreted?

If you are open with others about your SIV, ask them about their understanding of the messages your SIV behaviors communicate. Find out whether they are perceiving the message you are trying to send correctly, or whether they think your SIV means something different from what you intended. Write about this experience and what you have learned in your journal.

Self-Nurturing

Physically expressing pain through acts of SIV provides a way for you to nurture yourself physically, which becomes important when you are unable to do so emotionally. SIV is often used as an attempt to heal yourself, to make your internal wounds external and to nurture and heal these wounds. In other words, once the experienced pain or trauma is made external, as in a cut or burn, it is much easier to nurture and heal than when it existed only on a psychic or emotional level. The gratifying part of injuring yourself is the self-care which you get to provide afterwards.

Many people who engage in self-inflicted violence feel as if they are uncared for or as if they are alone in the world. This lack of connection with others is one of the primary influences of SIV. One of the results of self-injury is that it provides a situation in which nurturing must occur: When you are hurt, you have to take care of yourself.

You may have specific rituals around nurturing yourselves. Margaret, the woman described in the section on dissociation, would always wrap her wounds in toilet paper, using it to form a bandage which would help stop the bleeding. She would then cover the tissue bandage with an elastic bandage, enjoying the feeling of pressure on her arm. Caring for her own wounds was a way for Margaret to take care of herself and to receive the nurturing she greatly desired.

Often it is much easier to take care of a visible, tangible wound than to care for internal or emotional damage. Even if your wounds are not visible, such as when you hit yourself and no bruise is produced, you may still find ways to nurture yourself. In these instances, you may treat yourself as if you have physical wounds, such as wrapping your beaten thigh with an elastic bandage or taking a hot bath to ease the soreness from repeatedly pinching yourself. You may even find ways to nurture yourself for your emotional wounds, like eating a pint of chocolate ice cream because it helps to alleviate your feelings of self-pity or helplessness.

As mentioned previously, physical wounds can act as representations of psychological wounds. Therefore, by nurturing and taking care of your physical wounds, you are actually caring for your internal scars. As odd as it may sound, SIV may actually be a way for you to physically and psychologically take care of yourself. With work and the help of this book, however, you will be able to get to the point when you don't need to use SIV before you can take care of yourself. Take a minute now to write about the ways SIV allows you to care for yourself in the following exercise.

Activity 2.6: How Does SIV Let Me Take Care of Myself?

Nurturing provides a major role in SIV. This exercise will help you see how you take care of yourself after injuring yourself. Through this activity, you will likely discover that SIV allows you to nurture yourself in many ways. You might not take care of yourself to the same extent without SIV.

1. In your journal, describe how you care for your injuries. Do you wash them? Wrap them? Massage them? Do you seek treatment for your wounds?
2. If you have no visible wounds, do you find ways to care for them anyway? If so, how? Do you treat yourself better because you hurt yourself?
3. In what other ways does self-inflicted violence provide you with the opportunity to nurture yourself? Would you (or do you) care for yourself in these ways when you aren't injuring yourself?
4. How might you nurture yourself if you didn't injure yourself first?

Self-Punishment

It has been reported that more than half of all individuals who engage in self-inflicted violence were abused—physically, sexually, and/or emotionally—as children (this topic will be addressed in more detail in chapter 5). Often people who have been abused incorrectly blame themselves for the abuse or believe they “deserve” it because of their behaviors, thoughts, or feelings. As a child, you may have been taught that certain behaviors,

thoughts, or feelings, deserved punishment. This lesson from your childhood may have remained and may influence the ways in which you treat yourself.

Jasmine is an eighteen-year-old woman who lives with her twenty-five-year-old sister and works as a waitress in order to support her infant daughter. The father of Jasmine's baby is no longer involved in their lives. When Jasmine gets upset, she makes a fist and hits herself as hard as possible, often leaving large bruises on her legs, arms, and stomach.

As a child, Jasmine was physically abused. Both her father and her mother would hit, slap, and throw things at her. Jasmine blamed herself for this abuse, feeling as though she deserved to be punished for "thinking bad thoughts." Now, Jasmine engages in a similar pattern, hitting herself to the point of bruising. Although Jasmine loves her baby, she sometimes feels overwhelmed and questions her decision to keep the child. When Jasmine catches herself having such thoughts, she punishes herself by engaging in SIV.

People who engage in self-inflicted violence are often overly critical of themselves. This internal criticism facilitates their acts of self-injury. Criticism—internal or external—leads to feelings of shame and blame, which lead in turn to self-punishment.

While it is important for people to continually assess their actions, thoughts, and emotions in order to act responsibly and ethically, it is not particularly helpful to physically harm yourself as a method of punishment. Punishing yourself does not change the past, nor does it change the present. When you feel bad about an act you have committed, a more proactive method of handling the situation would be to try to make amends, or change the situation. Although hurting yourself may make you feel better at that moment, SIV cannot alter the past. And many of the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors for which you punish yourself may not in fact be blameworthy. Activity 2.7 will help you explore some of the ways you may be blaming yourself for the things that were not your fault.

Activity 2.7: What Are My Self-Punishing Thoughts?

This exercise will help you understand the ways you may blame yourself for events that have occurred in your life. Although at times self-blame is appropriate, you will probably find that you've been blaming yourself for events that you did not cause.

Part 1. Think of an episode in your life that left you with some intense emotion—anger, sadness, guilt, remorse, disappointment, anxiety, or fear. If you have been abused, you might want to think about a time that you were abused as you complete this activity. Now describe the following in your journal (you can do this for more than one event if you wish):

1. The event itself—what happened.
2. The feelings you have about this event.

3. All the ways you blame yourself for this event. (Usually these statements begin *if only I . . .* or contain the words *should* or *ought*.)

For example, Sally, who is twenty years old, feels great sadness about the divorce of her parents, which happened when she was nine. Sally blames herself for the divorce. She thinks that if only she had been a better daughter, her father would have stayed. She also thinks that she shouldn't have fought with her sister so much and that her fighting helped to cause the divorce.

It is likely that once you write down some of the ways you blame yourself for these incidents, you will see that you really could not have influenced the event very much at all. You will probably find that you've been blaming yourself for things that really were not your fault.

Part 2. Another way you may be punishing yourself is by being overly critical of yourself. This section will help you to assess the ways you criticize yourself. (You will probably find that you are being overly harsh with yourself.)

In your journal, list your self-criticisms—all the ways you view yourself negatively. For example, your list may include statements like "I'm lazy" or "I'm stupid" or "I'm crazy."

Once you have done this, think about how you came to believe these statements. Did someone say these things to you? Do any of these statements remind you of a particular time in your life or a specific event? Write down any associations you have for each of these statements. Understanding the source of these ideas will be important later, when you are learning to be less critical of yourself.

Reenacting Previous Abuse

As mentioned in the preceding section, a large number of individuals who injure themselves have suffered some type of previous abuse. Often this abuse is of a physical nature. Self-inflicted violence is one method of reenacting abuse that took place at an earlier time.

The reasons people reenact previous abuse are varied. Some may replicate the abuse so that they can feel a sense of control—control that wasn't present during the original abuse. When someone is hurting you, particularly when you are a child, you have few ways of controlling the situation and making the abuse stop. However, as an adult inflicting injury upon yourself, you are in total control, able to determine when and where to hurt yourself and stop at any point you wish. (This idea is discussed further in the following section.)

Some people may act out the abuse as part of post-traumatic stress, during a flashback. A flashback is an episode in which you feel as if you are actually reexperiencing the traumatic incident. For example, you might be sitting at your desk at work and something happens to trigger a flashback.

Suddenly, although in reality you are still at your desk, you believe that you are six years old and being beaten by your father. You might even behave as if this is really happening at that moment—cowering in your chair, shaking, and crying. During a flashback, some people act in ways that replicate the original abuse, inflicting physical injuries as they do so.

Some individuals with dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder), may find that one alter injures another alter in order to reenact the abuse. *Alter* means each distinct personality that exists. Most people with dissociative identity disorder have ten or fewer distinct personalities. These alters present themselves as different people; they may have different ages, genders, sexual orientations, temperaments, and skills. Sometimes one personality will act violently toward another personality in order to inflict punishment or replicate previous acts of abuse. Since the violent acts actually hurt the same physical body, this is considered SIV.

Susan is a thirty-three-year-old nurse who has approximately eight main and distinct alters. Her alters range in age from three to thirty-two. One of her alters is a young boy; several are lesbian. Susan became aware that she had multiple personalities about five years ago. Prior to that time, she had experienced many strange and unexplainable occurrences. She would be unable to recall long periods of time and would find objects in her house that she had no recollection of purchasing; once she found a new stereo system in her living room. And she would find gashes and scars on her chest for which she had no explanation. Susan later came to learn that one of her alters (a particularly angry adolescent) habitually engaged in acts of SIV.

As discussed in the preceding section, replication of the original abuse may also be a method of self-punishment or a way to alleviate guilt. And some people do not know why they reenact the abuse, but simply feel the need to do so.

Replicating former abuse may take many forms. You might injure yourself in exactly the same way you were injured as a child. Or because of physical or psychological limitations, you may injure yourself in a slightly different manner. For example, if as a child you sustained injuries on your back, you might hurt your arms or legs instead. (While it is not impossible to inflict violence on your own back, it is rather difficult.) Your arms or legs, though not identical to the location of the primary abuse, are similar enough to serve the purpose of replicating the abuse.

It is not uncommon for the type of abuse to differ from the original abuse. For example, if you were sexually abused, you may now cut or burn yourself. Although the forms of the injury may differ, the way in which you perceive these injuries may be similar enough to serve the purpose of replication and allow you to feel control or relief of tension. Activity 2.8 will help you explore the ways your SIV might be connected to abuse you have suffered at the hands of others.

Activity 2.8: How Does Trauma Relate to SIV in My Life?

Not everyone has been traumatized or abused. If you are fortunate enough to have never been abused or traumatized, you will probably want to skip this activity. If you have the feeling that you may have been abused but aren't able to remember specifics, you might want to hold off on completing this activity until you remember a bit more. However, if you have had a traumatic experience that you can recall with some degree of detail, it is very important that you complete this activity.

Because SIV is so connected to trauma, it is important for you to confront the abuse you endured. Although this may be very difficult for you, remembering and processing trauma in your past will help you to take more control of your SIV. This exercise is designed to help you reflect on the trauma.

Part 1. In your journal, describe the abuse (physical, sexual, psychological) that took place in your past. You can either use a single episode of abuse or reflect on the abuse more generally. Provide as much detailed information as you can, using the following questions as a guideline.

1. When did the abuse occur?
2. How old were you?
3. Where did the abuse occur?
4. Who did this to you?
5. What were you wearing?
6. What did you look like?
7. What time of year was it?
8. What time of day was it?
9. Were you alone or were others around?
10. What were you doing right before the abuse happened?
11. What exactly happened?
12. What did you do afterwards?
13. Did you tell anyone?
14. How did you feel before, during, and after the abuse?

Try to recall as much as you can. This may be a very difficult process, particularly if you have not addressed these issues before. If this gets too uncomfortable or overwhelming, put this book away and call someone you can talk with (a friend, family member, therapist). It's really important that you be gentle with yourself during this activity.

Part 2. Now describe all the ways that your past abuse is similar to the ways you hurt yourself now. For example, if you were slapped in the face as a child, do you slap your own face now?

The goal of this activity is to gain understanding of how the trauma in your life has affected your SIV. After completing the activity, you should be able to start to see some parallels between what happened to you in the past and what you do to yourself now.

Establishing Control

Control is an essential component in each of our lives, and perceiving that we have this control is indisputably important to our mental health. When we feel in control of our environment, we feel better. We are more confident, happier, and even physically healthier when we have a sense of control. How real or absolute this control is really doesn't matter—it is the perception of control that counts.

One of the first things that we as humans learn to control is our body: our movements, our language, our bowels. And, as very small children, we feel great pride and accomplishment in this control. Not so long ago my mother received a telephone call from my niece. In this conversation my niece proudly exclaimed, "Nana, I went pee-pee in the potty!" This was clearly a significant moment in her life. As adults, we tend to take for granted the things that we have actual mastery over. Most of us can walk, talk, and, to use my niece's expression, go pee-pee in the potty. But our view of the power and control we do have becomes masked by events like waiting in long lines at the grocery store, being chewed out by a boss, having a lover tell you that the relationship is over. When your feelings of control are lessened, your emotional and physical discomfort is increased. During these times, self-inflicted violence is often used to decrease tension and ease psychological or physical discomfort by allowing you to feel a sense of control.

On a very primitive level, SIV replicates the sense of control we had when we were children; it is a way to control our physical being, one of the few things we truly can control. Many episodes of SIV are triggered by feelings of lack of control. Isolation, loneliness, frustration, sadness, and alienation are common emotions prior to episodes of self-injury. Each of these emotions may be perceived as outside the realm of our control. By planning and carrying out acts of self-harm, you are, in a sense, structuring your life by controlling your emotional states.

You may also use SIV as a way to control your physical experiences. When you hurt yourself, you may be trying to establish control over a dissociative state. As mentioned previously, SIV is closely connected to dissociation, and is one method used to end or avoid this alteration of consciousness. Self-inflicted violence alters the physical sensations associated with dissociation, thus averting or disrupting this state. In other cases, SIV serves to induce an episode of dissociation. The highly tense state that

precedes an episode of self-injury tends to alter consciousness, often causing a dissociated state in which physical pain and sensation is reduced. The dissociated state may be either desired or undesired, depending on the person, the cause, and the likely result.

Thoughts can also be controlled through self-injury. By changing your behaviors, emotions, or physical sensations, you also affect your thoughts. Engaging in an act of SIV will cause changes in each of these areas. Therefore, you may hurt yourself in order to control intrusive, obsessive, or other-wish unwanted thoughts.

Control allows us to feel healthier, happier, more stable, more secure, and less anxious. We all need to believe that we can control certain aspects of our lives. Without this perceived control, we would feel as if we had little influence on our own lives, which could lead to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and depression. Through the use of SIV, you are able to clearly define and demonstrate a situation in which you do have complete control, allowing you to feel more control over your body, your thoughts, your behaviors, and even your emotions. Because of this, self-inflicted violence is an effective mechanism for temporarily increasing your perception of control in your life. It can help you feel more controlled, comfortable, and peaceful.

Activity 2.9 will help you explore the ways SIV may be helping you feel more in control of your life.

Activity 2.9: How Does SIV Help Me Feel in Control?

Because control is so essential in each of our lives, it is important to understand how it affects us. This exercise will help you determine how you perceive the control you have over your life as well as the way that SIV helps you feel more in control.

In your journal describe all the things in your life that you feel you have little or no control over. You may feel as if your entire life is out of control; however, in completing this activity, be as specific as you can. For instance, you may feel out of control in terms of your use of alcohol or drugs. You may feel unable to control your emotions. You may feel like you can't control your performance at work.

Once you've completed the first section, try to describe the ways that SIV allows you to feel more in control. Again, be as specific as you can. Understanding how SIV helps you feel in control will be important when you begin to look at alternative ways of getting this sense of control.

