

CHAPTER 4

The Cycle of Self-Inflicted Violence

Self-inflicted violence generally follows a fairly predictable cycle. Why and how you hurt yourself, the process of SIV, doesn't change much from one episode of self-injury to the next. Even if you alter the method of self-injury—for instance, cutting yourself one time and bruising yourself the next—the thoughts and emotions that occur during the process of SIV tend to follow a definite pattern. The first section of this chapter will help you better understand the cycle of your thoughts and emotions.

Although your thoughts and emotions are quite important, they are only two components of the entire process of SIV. The second part of this chapter presents different models that explain other parts of the cycle of self-inflicted violence. These models break down the process of SIV to make it more understandable and to help you to explore some of the reasons you engage in SIV, the possible functions self-injury may serve in your life, and what you experience physically and psychologically during the course of SIV.

Thoughts and SIV

Although you are probably not aware of it, it is likely that your thoughts follow a predictable cycle throughout the course of SIV. This section will help you identify and understand the thoughts during the cycle of self-injury. This

will be helpful when you begin to work on stopping SIV in your life, which is discussed in chapter 7.

Thoughts Before SIV

Before you hurt yourself, many things are going through your mind. Some of these thoughts you are likely to be aware of, such as thinking of the method you will use to hurt yourself or even debating whether you will really injure yourself at all. However, you are probably also having many other thoughts of which you aren't so aware. Typically, these thoughts are one of the primary sources of the motivation to hurt yourself. Therefore, to create permanent change in your SIV behaviors, it is essential that the thoughts preceding these activities be identified and understood so that later they can be changed.

Bridget is a nineteen-year-old college student who is enrolled in honors-level courses and has many friends. She started burning herself when she was fourteen, stopped injuring herself for several years, and has now returned to the behavior. She typically burns herself using a cigarette lighter, which she always carries in her backpack. Bridget lives in the college dormitory and has a roommate, but finds the privacy to hurt herself when everyone else is asleep. She has many scars on her arms and legs and usually wears clothes that keep them covered. When people do notice her scars, Bridget usually implies that the scars are the result of a childhood accident.

Bridget has become able to identify some of the thoughts that typically appear prior to hurting herself. See if any of your thoughts sound similar to Bridget's:

No one likes me.

I hate my body.

Nothing ever works out right.

No one would ever want to be with me.

I'm so stupid.

Life sucks.

I hate everyone.

I can't stand my life.

I want someone to care about me.

Sometimes your thoughts will stem directly from identifiable events. For instance, if you received a poor evaluation at work, you might think to yourself that you are a bad employee. At other times, the origins of your thoughts will be more complicated and less clearly defined. For example,

you may think that you are unattractive or lazy or stupid, and you may not be able to determine when and where this idea first originated.

Regardless of their origins, probably many of the thoughts you have before you injure yourself are negative. During the period preceding SIV, you are almost certainly thinking of yourself and your world in a pessimistic, despairing way. It is these negative thoughts that lead to the desire to self-injure.

Some people use SIV as a way to help control the negative thoughts (and emotions) they have. When you are experiencing thoughts that are extremely negative and destructive, you are likely to want to find a way to make them stop. SIV gives you an activity you can focus on—in a sense you deflect your negative thinking by substituting thoughts about the self-injurious act itself, such as planning a method or finding a place to hurt yourself. This is to say that your original thoughts of *I'm no good*, are replaced with thoughts of *I'm going to hurt myself*. Once you begin to concentrate on injuring yourself and all the details involved in that act, you push aside the original thoughts that led you to want to hurt yourself.

Although SIV is one method that allows you to control your thoughts and escape the discomfort caused by your negative thoughts, there are other options. Before you can exercise them, however, you must learn to identify your precipitating thoughts. Activity 4.1, at the end of this section, will give you some practice in doing this.

Thoughts During SIV

As mentioned in previous chapters, many people enter a dissociated state immediately before injuring themselves. In such a state you may feel as if you are not totally present in your body—as if you're floating or detached, or even like you're watching yourself in a movie. One of the functions of this state is to prevent the body from feeling pain, and it keeps you from feeling much pain when you hurt yourself. While dissociation is helpful in this sense, it is less helpful in other ways. Specifically, dissociation makes it very difficult to become aware of exactly what you are thinking at the time. However, it is precisely during this dissociated state that your thinking is likely to become the most irrational and often the most destructive. Here are some examples of thoughts that occur immediately preceding or during an act of self-inflicted violence:

I need to hurt myself.

This is the only way I can feel better. Just a few more (cuts, burns, bruises . . .) and I'll be OK.

Each of these thoughts is clearly illogical. At the time, however, each of them seems to make perfect sense.

Thoughts Following SIV

Immediately following an incident of self-inflicted violence, most people report an inability to access their thoughts. For many people, the physiological process associated with SIV causes their thoughts to become disorganized or scattered. However, shortly thereafter they regain the ability to identify specific thoughts. Thoughts during this time tend to focus on three major themes: shame, guilt, and relief. Bridget's thoughts after burning herself closely follow these themes:

I can't believe I just hurt myself again.

I can't tell anyone about this.

I'm so stupid for burning myself.

When am I going to stop doing this?

As dumb as it sounds, hurting myself makes me feel better.

Although thoughts filled with shame and guilt may be almost irresistible, generally they are not helpful. In all likelihood, negative feelings such as shame and guilt are part of the reason you want to hurt yourself in the first place. Allowing yourself to continue to think such thoughts will only make you want to inflict more injury on yourself. Instead of continuing negative and potentially dangerous styles of thought, it would be better for you to stop or change them. Specific methods of altering your thoughts will be presented in chapter 7, which focuses on stopping SIV. For now, the following activity will help you begin to identify the thoughts you have that make up a part of the cycle of your SIV.

Activity 4.1: The Cycle of My Thoughts

It is very important that you learn to identify and recognize the thoughts that you have during the process of SIV. Knowing what you are thinking will enable you to understand why you want to hurt yourself and to begin controlling your desire to hurt yourself.

This exercise will assist you in identifying and recognizing your thoughts throughout the process of SIV. This is an important initial step in changing your SIV behaviors. Exercises in chapter 7 will use the information you uncover here to help you learn some ways to control and change your thoughts. So you will need to complete this activity before doing the related activities in that chapter.

In your journal, begin keeping a log of all the thoughts that accompany episodes of hurting yourself. Since it may be difficult to remember the thoughts that you had from previous episodes of SIV, try to record your thoughts each time from now on when you want to hurt yourself.

1. Whenever you feel the desire to hurt yourself, simply take a few minutes and write down what you are thinking. Do your thoughts

have any common themes? Are they similar to Bridget's thoughts—filled with criticism and despair? (This step may have the side effect of lessening your desire to injure yourself.)

2. After you have hurt yourself, try to record any thoughts that you had during the actual process of SIV. What do you remember thinking?
3. List the thoughts you had after you injured yourself. Were your thoughts like Bridget's, in that they were self-critical or focused on shame? Or were your thoughts more filled with relief or plans for future self-injury?
4. How do you think your thoughts affect your desire to hurt yourself? Do you have specific thoughts that encourage SIV?

Emotions and SIV

Much like thoughts, the emotions experienced throughout an episode of self-inflicted violence tend to follow a predictable pattern. Although not everyone experiences these feelings, the majority of people engaging in SIV will encounter at least some of them. You may not even be aware of what you're feeling during various points in the self-injury process. By learning to identify your feelings, you will probably find similarities between your own experience and what is presented in this section.

Emotions Before SIV

Preceding an episode of self-injury, most individuals experience strong negative feelings that are overwhelming and intolerable. While the source of the feelings may vary, the emotions generally fall into several distinct, yet similar categories: anger and frustration, alienation, and depression.

People may feel frustrated or angered in response to any number of events, but in general these feelings usually stem from an inability to fulfill a desire. Thus, frustration may be caused by an inability to meet a variety of wishes or demands. For instance, you might feel frustrated because your partner is unresponsive to your needs, or because you are not able to control your own feelings, or because a television show you enjoy has been preempted by an infomercial. The possible sources of frustration are too numerous to imagine, and each episode of SIV may be related to a distinct source of this emotion.

Anger, while similar to frustration, generally stems from feelings of hostility. More often than frustration, anger often results from interactions with others that do not go as planned, and it is frequently directed at a specific person. Often anger is a response to treatment by others that you perceive as unfair. For example, say that after I have been standing in line at the grocery store for nearly ten minutes the checkstand next to me opens.

But instead of the new cashier helping the person who had been waiting longest (me), she helps the last person in the original line (who had just arrived). I perceive the situation as unfair, and I get angry. I feel hostile toward both the new cashier and the guy who simply sauntered up to the checkstand.

While frustration, anger, and hostility can be useful emotions, they can also be damaging if they aren't handled correctly. Emotions that are not released or transformed (particularly frustration and anger) tend to have negative side effects. In fact, it has been shown that hostility is significantly related to the occurrence of heart disease. As mentioned in chapter 2, many people who purposefully injure themselves do not know how to effectively manipulate these emotions.

Alienation is a second emotion that commonly precedes an act of self-inflicted violence. Like frustration and anger, feelings of loneliness, isolation, or alienation can stem from any number of events, including rejection by another, separation from an important figure in your life, abandonment, or mistreatment. General feelings of disconnection—perhaps caused by an inability to receive support from others—are common prior to SIV. And the fact that SIV tends to be practiced privately, in a clandestine manner, serves to increase these feelings of isolation and disconnection. It is difficult to be connected with others if you are in seclusion.

You may have also noticed that once you have hurt yourself, you tend to isolate yourself from others even more. You may do this physically, by staying away from other people, or emotionally, by hiding your SIV or omitting information about how you're really feeling. (This topic will be covered in greater detail in chapter 6.) Thus, alienation, isolation, and disconnection may be both an influence of SIV and a result of SIV.

The third type of emotion associated with self-inflicted violence is that of depression. Feelings of sadness, melancholy, or unhappiness frequently precede acts of SIV. Some people experience depression as boredom or emptiness or a feeling of dissatisfaction with their life. However you phrase it, this emotion is likely to produce feelings of pointlessness and hopelessness.

These feelings—anger, alienation, and depression—combine to form the ideal emotional environment for an act of self-inflicted violence. If you feel frustrated, alone, and hopeless, you are likely to use any means available to alter this overwhelming mood. The high level of tension produced by this emotional interaction also contributes to the urge to engage in SIV. While it is certainly possible to lessen this emotional state without the use of self-injury, many people who engage in SIV may not know how to use alternative means or may find themselves unable to do so at the time. Locating alternatives to self-injury will also be addressed in chapter 7.

Emotional States During SIV

During the self-injurious act itself, emotional states are difficult to ascertain. As mentioned previously, one of the primary goals of SIV is to alter

or mask the experience of overwhelming emotions. Because SIV is so effective at this task, most people are unable to identify emotional states during this stage.

Many individuals dissociate while hurting themselves. Dissociation can be both an emotional as well as a physical state. That is, during a dissociative episode your level of consciousness is altered, which serves to obscure or distort your memories and make your emotions more difficult to identify. Finally, the release of endorphins (neurotransmitters that help block the feeling of physical pain) in response to the injury also masks feelings.

Emotions Following SIV

After an episode of self-inflicted violence, most people progress through two distinct stages of emotion. First, a great sense of relief is experienced. The enormous amount of tension that preceded the act has dissipated. In addition, the sense of calmness and happiness produced by the release of endorphins may continue for some length of time. For these reasons, immediately following an episode of self-injury, you probably feel pretty good. These good feelings are one reason why SIV is so self-reinforcing. Most people would probably like to feel that way more often, though not everyone goes to the same lengths.

The second emotional state you probably experience occurs after the positive feelings have worn off. This second stage includes feelings of guilt, regret, shame, and the return of the emotions that were evident before the act. By the time you reach this stage, you probably feel even worse than you did before injuring yourself. You may even feel so bad that you want to hurt yourself again. It is precisely this emotional experience that creates the cyclic pattern of SIV.

Frank is a twenty-two-year-old office worker who for the past ten years has engaged in SIV. When Frank hurts himself, he drops bricks or other heavy objects on his feet. He has broken bones in his feet many times. He explains the events like this:

I hurt myself when I'm feeling frustrated and can't figure out a way to make things better. It's weird, but throwing bricks on my feet really helps, at least for a while. I get rid of that frustration and feel something real instead. It works for a while, but then the feelings come back anyway.

Activity 4.2 will help you begin to understand the cycle of your own emotions in relation to SIV, which is a first step toward breaking the cycle of SIV.

Activity 4.2: The Cycle of My Emotions

Understanding the specific emotions that are associated with SIV is necessary before you can change these behaviors. This activity will allow

you to determine what you are feeling during the cycle of SIV. You will be referring back to this activity in chapter 7, when you are learning how to end your SIV behaviors.

For this activity you probably want to focus on a single incident. Try to think of a specific time when you hurt yourself that was fairly typical of most of the times you hurt yourself.

1. Focus on how you were feeling before the actual act of SIV. Sometimes it's hard to remember what you were feeling in the past. It might help you to try and remember some of the details of your surroundings at that time: Where were you? What were you wearing? What time of day was it? Try to get a clear picture in your mind of what was going on right before your injured yourself. Now try to remember what you were feeling.

2. Now, in the list below, write a B next to each of the emotions that you felt before you hurt yourself. Next, circle the emotions that are usually the most intense during this period. (Use the provided spaces to list any other emotions that you experience.)

- | | | | |
|--------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| anger | _____ | disconnection | _____ |
| frustration | _____ | depression | _____ |
| hopelessness | _____ | hostility | _____ |
| sadness | _____ | tension | _____ |
| isolation | _____ | fear | _____ |
| alienation | _____ | guilt | _____ |
| shame | _____ | loneliness | _____ |
| anxiety | _____ | emptiness | _____ |
| relief | _____ | euphoria | _____ |
| numbness | _____ | depression | _____ |
| wholeness | _____ | elation | _____ |
| happiness | _____ | pride | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

3. Then, place a D beside any emotion you experienced during SIV. As mentioned earlier, you may have great difficulty identifying any emotions during SIV. If you are unable to identify any particular feelings from this stage, don't worry. Simply go on to the next part of the activity.

4. Finally, place an A next to each of the emotions that you feel after you hurt yourself. Underline the emotions that are usually most intense during this period. It is likely that many of these will be the same emotions you felt before you hurt yourself.

Are you beginning to see how your emotions change throughout the cycle of SIV? Were you able to identify the emotions you feel most intensely? How do you think these emotions influence your desire to hurt yourself? Understanding the cycle of your emotions will be helpful to you when you begin to create strategies to reduce or eliminate your self-injurious activities.

Models of SIV

When I was a kid, I spent a great deal of my allowance and my time buying and assembling toy models. I loved the way the pieces fit together and made something whole out of what seemed like thousands of tiny parts. I also enjoyed learning how something that was really complicated could be broken down into smaller pieces that were easier to handle and understand.

As an adult, I have learned to deal with models of a different kind. In the field of psychology another kind of model is often used to explain complex ideas. Just like my childhood models, psychological models offer an easier way to understand ideas that may be very involved or complicated. They help to break down large, complex ideas into smaller pieces that can be more easily understood. Although toy models involve actual tangible parts, psychological models consist of concepts, concepts that represent the inner workings of a behavior, thought, idea, or feeling—things that can't really be seen. Yet, like physical models, psychological models help us to understand their subject as a whole.

Several models are used by psychologists to better understand the nature and cycle of self-inflicted violence. While each of these models appears to have some validity, I urge you to use your own experiences to judge the accuracy of each model as it applies to you.

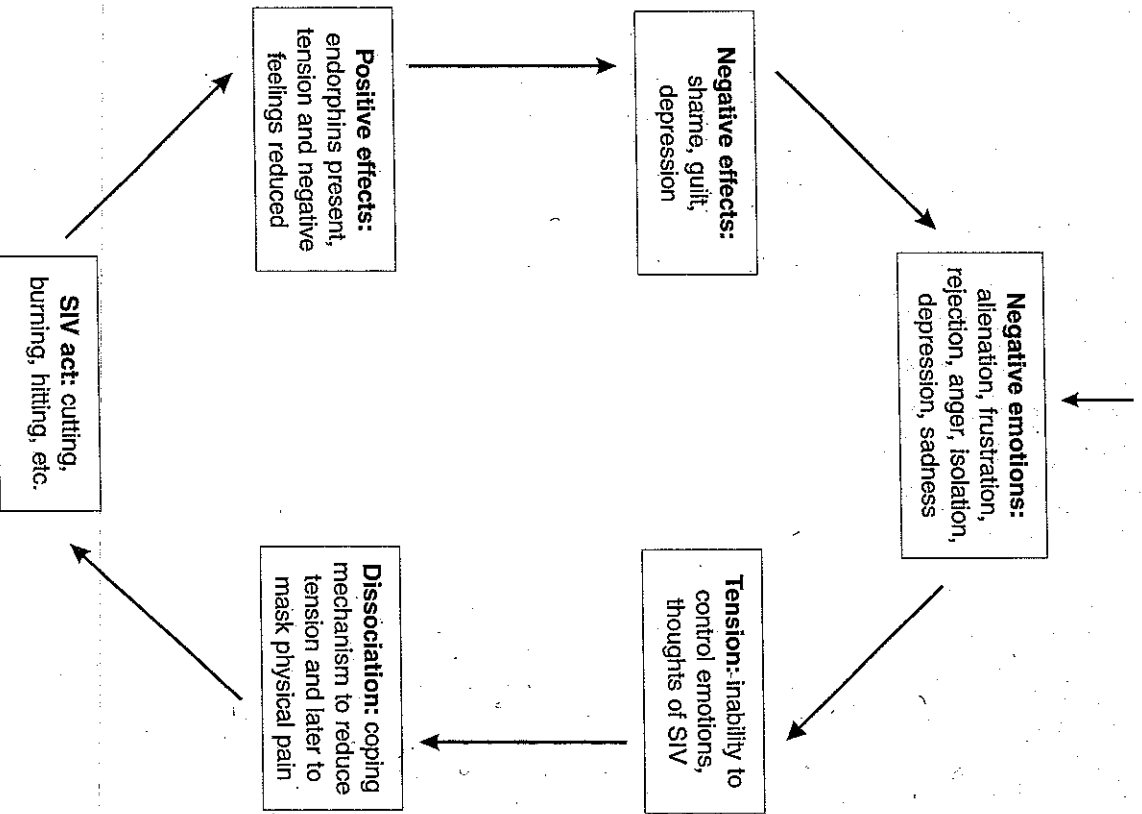
The Addiction Model

The first model of self-inflicted violence is very similar to models used to explain various addictions, including substance use, eating disorders, gambling behaviors, sexual addictions, and compulsive shopping.

Figure A represents the process and essential components of this model. As you can see, this model is cyclic: Self-inflicted violent behavior continues in part due to the direct effect of the behavior and its consequences. In other words, while SIV may help you to feel better, it may also lead to further acts of self-injury. The following sections describe the particular components of this model and the ways in which they create the cycle of self-inflicted violence.

Figure A: The Addiction Model of SIV

Note: Although the model is cyclical, SIV typically begins at this point.



Negative emotions. Negative emotions generally mark the beginning of the SIV cycle. As previously discussed, negative emotions may stem from any number of sources and tend to fall into three main categories:

- Anger, hostility, and frustration
- Alienation, isolation, disconnection, rejection, and loneliness
- Sadness, depression, and simply feeling bad

Usually these negative emotions are experienced as overwhelming, uncontrollable, or fragmenting (a feeling of being scattered or not whole). This highly uncomfortable state makes you want to find ways to feel better quickly. Although the effects are sometimes extremely detrimental in the long term, SIV does provide an effective, short-term way of overcoming these emotions.

Tension. Once SIV has been considered as an option for reducing these negative feelings, the emotional experience shifts to a state of anxiety or high tension. So, while you may have started out feeling frustrated, depressed, or sad, you are now dealing with very intense feelings of tension or anxiety. This tension is partially a product of the anticipation of inflicting self-injury; once you begin to think about hurting yourself, you begin to anticipate the actual act of self-injury.

Because SIV may be either desired or undesired, or both, your anticipation may contain elements of excitement and/or anxiety, either of which will make you feel tension. The sense of excitement that may precede an episode of SIV stems from the fact that self-injury can produce feelings of euphoria and relief, as discussed earlier. Thus, when you are anticipating this event, you may feel a different kind of stress called *eustress*, which is stress or tension stemming from a positively viewed source. However, you may also feel fear or anxiety when anticipating an episode of SIV. You may view SIV as a necessary, but undesired event. You may feel anxious because of the actual danger involved or because you feel unable to your control emotions in a more traditional manner. You might even see self-inflicted violence as a last resort, an extreme attempt to retain a sense of sanity.

Dissociation. Dissociation is the next stage in the SIV cycle. Dissociation stems directly from the high-tension level produced by overwhelming or uncontrollable emotions. Dissociation (discussed in chapter 2) serves a very useful dual purpose in that it both acts as a coping mechanism and allows you to withstand intense emotional and physical pain, reducing your experience of tension and later masks the physical pain produced by the injury.

The SIV Act. During this stage you are actively engaging in self-harm. Cutting, burning, hitting, bruising, pulling hair, picking scabs, nail biting, and excessive scratching are all common SIV behaviors. During these actions dissociation tends to be at its highest, minimizing the experience of

physical pain. At this time endorphins are also released, aiding dissociation in limiting the amount of pain you perceive. It is the combination of endorphins and dissociation that causes many people to report a surprising lack of physical discomfort as they engage in self-injurious activities.

Positive effects. Immediately after the self-injurious act comes a sense of relief. At this point the endorphins stimulated by the SIV continue to be present, allowing you to experience a sense of euphoria (joy and calmness) and well-being. In addition, the SIV act has enabled you to successfully transform your uncontrollable negative emotions into something more tangible and controllable—the self-injury. By performing and then nurturing the self-injury, you have turned a negative psychological state into something manageable, regaining control over your emotional and physical states. It is the effectiveness of this coping mechanism that allows SIV to provide such a strong and necessary sense of temporary relief and freedom from psychological distress.

Negative Effects. One of the problems with self-inflicted violence as a method of coping is that its effects are only temporary. As the endorphins dissipate and the consequences of the self-injurious behavior become more clear, you are likely to experience negative emotions such as shame, guilt and remorse. In addition, negative emotions such as you felt before you hurt yourself will often reappear at this point or shortly thereafter. As a result of having engaged in self-inflicted violence, you may be left feeling worse than you did before hurting yourself. And it is these negative emotions that will plant the seeds for your next episode of self-inflicted violence.

Liz is a seventeen-year-old high-school junior. She described her process of SIV as follows:

It all starts cause I'm not feeling much of anything. I mean, I know I'm depressed and stuff, but I just can't feel it. So I decide to cut myself, and I know I'll feel better after. When I'm getting my stuff together, you know, the razor blade and the paper towels and the bandages, I feel like I've got lots of energy. I get into this state where it seems like I'm not really real but I can feel every piece of my body tingling. It sounds weird, but it feels really good. And when I cut myself, this feeling actually gets stronger. I feel alive. I love how the blood feels running down my arm. It's all warm and stuff. Usually by the time I finish putting the bandages on my arm, the tingling feeling is gone and I just feel kind of drained. Sometimes I'll even go sleep afterwards. Later, when I think about what I've done and I see the slashes on my arm I start feeling bad again. I don't like having to hurt myself.

Activity 4.3 will help you examine how applicable the addiction model is to the pattern of SIV in your life.

Activity 4.3: My SIV and the Addiction Model

Understanding how your own cycle of SIV operates will help you later when you begin to change this pattern and decrease your self-injurious activities.

1. Think back to a specific time when you hurt yourself. You may want to use your most recent episode of SIV since it is probably freshest in your memory. In your journal, list the three emotions you felt most intensely before you hurt yourself. (If you're unable to recall, you might want to review Activity 4.2.) For example:

1. *Sadness*
2. *Anger*
3. *Disappointment*

2. Now, try to describe in your journal how you felt when you began to think about hurting yourself. You were feeling bad and you got the idea to hurt yourself. Then how did you feel? Did you experience a change in your negative emotions? Did you become tense or excited or nervous? Or did you become numb or dissociated? Did your feelings change even more as you got closer to injuring yourself? What happened?

For example:

Once I decided to hurt-myself, I felt really excited and full of energy. I didn't feel sad anymore because I knew I was going to do something that would make me feel better. Right before I hurt myself I felt really zoned out, but even that was a calm and good feeling.

3. Describe as best you can what you went through when you injured yourself. Write about what you did, what instruments (if any) you used, how long the process took, your experience of pain and/or dissociation, how you felt, and anything else you think is important. How did your feelings change throughout the process? When were you more tense, less tense, more dissociated? Do you have difficulty remembering the specifics of this stage of SIV? Describe whatever you felt or can remember.
4. Take a few minutes now to think about what happened after you hurt yourself. In your journal describe what you went through afterward. How did you feel? Were you calm, peaceful, tired, anxious? (Again, you might want to refer to the preceding activity to help you remember some of these feelings.)
5. Because relief is one of the primary feelings resulting from SIV, it is important to explore exactly how SIV causes this experience

and how you define relief. In your journal list all the ways that self-inflicted violence gave you relief.

6. Finally, you need to examine the ultimate stage of the SIV cycle—the negative results and return of your negative feelings. Knowing when you might experience the return of negative feelings will be very important when you try to stop hurting yourself. Using the same episode of SIV you've been following throughout this activity, think about how long it took after hurting yourself before you began to feel bad again. Was it minutes? Hours? Days? Weeks? Were the feelings the same as before you hurt yourself? If they weren't, how did they change? Was it the intensity or the actual emotions that changed? How long do you usually go between episodes of SIV?

Hopefully, this activity has helped you to see how your SIV activities follow the basic addiction model. By understanding your behaviors in terms of a model, you will be better able to control your self-injuries and prevent yourself from engaging in these activities.

You have probably noticed by now that many of these activities ask you to describe what you go through when you injure yourself. Although this process of describing your experience may seem redundant and unnecessary, it is actually designed to be helpful. Going over what you feel, think, and do when you hurt yourself not only enables you to remember more and more important details, but improves your ability to deal with self-inflicted violence. By repeatedly bringing SIV to your consciousness, you lessen the impact of remembering these events. You probably already have a much easier time thinking about specific times when you hurt yourself now than you did in earlier exercises. The shame, embarrassment, and other emotions you feel lose some of their power as you confront them more often, which will be helpful when you begin to work on stopping SIV.

The Operant Conditioning Model

A second model used to explain the cycle of SIV is that of operant conditioning. Operant conditioning states that what happens following a behavior (the consequences) influences the likelihood of that behavior recurring. According to this theory, behaviors followed by positive outcomes (reinforcers) will be strengthened, whereas behaviors followed by negative outcomes (punishments) will be weakened. This theory of learning and behavior is called Thorndike's Law of Effect.

In simpler terms, this model means that the consequences of your SIV activities will affect the probability that you will use SIV in the future. For instance, if a result of an act of self-inflicted violence was that it made you feel better, you would probably hurt yourself again. But if you injured yourself and it hurt much more than you expected, you would be less likely to

try SIV in the future. The concepts of reinforcement and punishment are explained more fully in the following sections.

Reinforcement. *Reinforcement* is a psychological term that basically means the same thing as reward. When you experience reinforcement, you receive a reward or a pleasurable consequence for some behavior. Reinforcement always makes it more likely that you will repeat whatever behavior produced the reward. For example, although I really enjoy working, there are some days I would rather stay in bed or go to a movie or do anything but go to work. But because I drag myself out of bed and go to work anyway, at the end of each month I receive a pretty nice (and necessary) reward—a paycheck. The paycheck acts as a reinforcer and makes it likely that I'll continue to go to work.

Reinforcers can be both positive and negative, but they're always rewards. Unlike the way we typically think of *negative* and *positive*—as *good* and *bad*—when relating to reinforcement these terms take on slightly different definitions. *Positive reinforcement* means to provide a consequence that is desired. For example, there are few things in the world I enjoy more than going to the beach. So to give myself an incentive to finish a task, I promise myself that when I finish I can go to the beach. When I receive this incentive I am positively rewarding myself, giving myself something that I desire. This is an excellent way of strengthening any behavior, and it helps me to get my work done.

Self-inflicted violence provides several positive reinforcers, as discussed in chapter 2: the euphoric feeling produced by endorphins, self-nurturing of wounds, expression of feelings, connection or communication with others via your injuries, and so on. Because it offers so many rewards and positive consequences, your SIV behavior is likely to be strengthened.

Negative reinforcers are a second type of consequence that also strengthens behavior. *Negative*, in operant conditioning language, refers to the removal of something, as opposed to the receipt of something (a positive reward). Negative reinforcement occurs when something unwanted is removed or reduced, thus strengthening the behavior that removed or reduced the undesired thing.

Let me provide an example: Several years ago I had some neighbors who, when they saw that I was home (when either I was visible or my front door was open), would simply walk into my house and announce their presence. Although they viewed this as neighborly, I like my privacy and so their behavior bugged me. One day I discovered that I could lock my screen door, forcing my neighbors to use the doorbell to announce their arrival. My behavior of locking the screen door reduced undesired intrusions by my neighbors. And since this was a highly effective way of keeping them out of my house, I began to lock the screen door frequently. My screen-locking behavior was strengthened because the consequences were so rewarding.

Negative reinforcement works similarly in terms of SIV behaviors. Think of your negative emotions as troublesome neighbors. Once you find a

behavior that reduces or eliminates their intrusion, you're likely to engage in that behavior quite often. Self-inflicted violence works well to reduce the presence of negative emotions. It is similarly effective at ending or preventing undesired dissociative episodes. Because SIV is so good at reducing or eliminating negative emotional states, it has exceptionally strong negative reinforcement properties. The numerous reinforcements, both positive and negative, that self-injurious behavior can provide help strengthen the likelihood that SIV behaviors will continue.

Punishment. You may be wondering about the flip side to reinforcement: punishment. When your behavior creates a consequence that you don't like, that is undesired, that consequence is called a *punishment*. Unlike reinforcement, which strengthens the likelihood a behavior will reoccur, punishment weakens a behavior.

Like reinforcement, punishment can be either positive or negative. Positive punishment means the presentation of something undesired. For example, as a child I once used my mother's lipstick to paint my face like an Indian warrior—at least my imagined version of what one should look like. I did not know that Indian warriors needed permission to paint their faces, as well as appropriate paints. Needless to say, I got in trouble and was punished for my behavior. If I had been spanked for my actions, I would have received positive punishment. The presentation of something undesired, the spanking, would have decreased the likelihood that I would use my mother's lipstick as war paint in the future.

My parents chose a negative punishment instead: I had something I enjoyed taken away from me. When something that you enjoy or desire is removed from you as a consequence to your behavior, it is called *negative punishment*. I was not allowed to watch television for the rest of the weekend. Taking away my beloved television was a form of punishment that decreased the probability that I would ever use lipstick again (for war paint or otherwise).

Both positive punishment and negative punishment reduce the chance that you will again engage in the original behavior. Self-inflicted violence has properties of both positive and negative punishment. Among its several forms of positive punishment are undesired wounds or scars and feelings of shame, regret, and embarrassment.

Negative punishments, although less obvious than the positive punishments, also result from self-inflicted violence. The feelings of shame and embarrassment (positive punishers) typically produced by self-injury may cause you to avoid certain situations or activities you might desire. If, for example, you wear long-sleeved shirts or long pants in the summer so that others won't see your scars, SIV is preventing you from going swimming or wearing clothes that are more comfortable and appropriate to the season. SIV may also reduce the honesty, pride, and connection with others you experience. Because these desired things are reduced or removed by your

self-injurious activities, those activities are exerting a negatively punishing consequence.

As you can see, self-inflicted violence produces both reinforcing and punishing consequences. So if SIV has consequences that increase the likelihood of this behavior and also has consequences that decrease its likelihood, what does this mean? The answer is in many ways quite simple: As the saying goes, "Timing is everything."

The timing of a consequence has a profound effect on the fate of the behavior. Consequences that occur immediately after, during, or even slightly before a behavior have the greatest effect on the perception and future of that behavior. Return for a moment to the addiction model of SIV. Before, during, and immediately after an act of self-injury the consequences consist primarily of reinforcements (you feel better or at least less bad; endorphins are released). It is not until later that the punishing consequences make their appearance (you feel physical pain; you have to cover your body; you feel shame). Thus, because reinforcement is more closely associated in time with self-inflicted violence, the likelihood that acts of self-injury will recur is great.

Take some time now for the following exercise, which will help you to look at the ways your SIV has been affected by the principles of operant conditioning.

Activity 4.4: How Operant Conditioning Affects My SIV

In this exercise, it is likely that you will discover that in many ways the consequences of your self-injuries have influenced your desire to continue to hurt yourself. In chapter 7, several operant conditioning techniques will be employed to help you stop hurting yourself.

1. First let's focus on the ways that SIV offers you positively reinforcing consequences. In trying to decrease your SIV behavior, you will want to consider these consequences. Place a check mark next to each of the ways that self-inflicted violence provides you with positive reinforcement. Use the blank lines to list additional positive reinforcers. Remember, positive reinforcers are those consequences that give you something rewarding.

_____ Produces good feelings	_____ Lets me nurture myself
_____ Allows for communication	_____ Provides control
_____ Produces tangible results	_____ Enhances dissociation
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. Because negative reinforcement is also involved in strengthening a behavior, it is important for you to understand how you decrease or eliminate unwanted situations, feelings, or things through your own SIV activities. Place a check mark next to each of the ways that self-inflicted violence provides you with negative reinforcement. Again, use the blanks for additional negative reinforcers. Remember, negative reinforcers are rewarding in that they reduce or eliminate something you don't like.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| _____ Decreases dissociation | _____ Decreases tension |
| _____ Decreases anger or frustration | _____ Reduces sadness |
| _____ Reduces depression | _____ Decreases need for others |
| _____ Decreases hopelessness | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

3. Now let's focus on the ways that SIV introduces punishments in your life. Place a check next to each of the ways that SIV acts as a form of punishment. Once again, blank lines have been provided for your use.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| _____ Produces shame | _____ Reduces connection with others |
| _____ Increases secrecy | _____ Produces wounds or scars |
| _____ Increases isolation | _____ Enhances feelings of failure |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

Did you find that SIV is better at providing you with reinforcement than punishment? You probably wouldn't continue to hurt yourself otherwise.

Opponent Process Theory

Opponent process theory states that a reaction to an event will automatically produce the opposite reaction. For example, you are walking down a dark alley and from behind you comes a loud noise that startles you. Your heart begins to race and your breathing becomes shallow as you turn to find out the source of the noise. When you realize it was a car backfiring, your fear reaction gradually yields to feelings of relief and calmness—hence “opponent,” or opposite, part of the theory’s name. Self-inflicted violence works

in a similar manner. Feelings of great tension and fear before SIV are later replaced by the opposite emotional state, relaxation and peace, the *opponent process* of relief.

Over time, as you engage in acts of self-harm, you begin to expect this sense of relief. Because you have learned to expect this desired emotion, you may begin to enjoy the act of self-inflicted violence, just as some people love to bungee jump because after the jump their hearts stop pounding and they feel much less tense than before the jump. Other people enjoy eating extremely spicy foods because it feels so good when their mouths stop burning. These people learn to anticipate the cessation of fear or pain and so look forward to the activity that causes it. The same is true for SIV. You may feel excitement, anticipation, and euphoria just before or while you hurt yourself because you know that this act will lead to relief of intolerable negative emotions and help you to feel better when you're through. So not only do you begin to expect this sense of relief, but you begin to seek it out by instigating negative sensations, as when you intentionally injure yourself.

Observational Learning

Observational learning works on a very simple premise: We do what we view. There is no question that we learn by watching others. We model our behaviors on the behaviors of others. And when we see others engage in a behavior that appears to be rewarding, we are likely to try that behavior ourselves. When we see others engage in a behavior that seems to have undesired consequences, we are less likely to try that behavior.

As a child, I once watched my older brother hold an oral thermometer up to a lightbulb in order to make it appear as if he had a fever. The result of his behavior was that he was permitted to stay home from school that day and that his family (except for me) treated him kindly. This seemed like a pretty good deal to me. So the following week, when I really didn't want to go to school, I tried his technique. It worked, and I remained out of school for several days. I had observed and modeled his behavior to gain something I wanted—a few days off.

We can also apply this model of learning to self-inflicted violence. Say you witness someone in great emotional pain. You watch as she intentionally injures herself, and you see her seem to gain great relief and pleasure from this action. You may even see her get extra attention from others or get treated in a different, desirable manner. The next time you are in great emotional pain, it is likely that you will remember this episode and you may try these self-injurious methods for yourself.

As mentioned in chapter 1, in the section on how SIV develops, if you were ever in a confined setting such as a psychiatric ward of a hospital or a prison you may have seen others use SIV. You may have even modeled the SIV behaviors you witnessed and started your own self-injurious activities.

Within environments such as these, modeling can and does occur, significantly spreading the occurrence of SIV.

If you have not been in such a setting, it is not likely that you would have had the opportunity to observe and model SIV behavior. As mentioned previously, SIV usually occurs in isolation and is a very secretive type of activity. Therefore, away from these confined environments, modeling of SIV behaviors does not seem to occur.

If you are like most people, you have probably never witnessed anyone else performing this behavior. However, even though you may not have actually seen someone else performing SIV, you may have had some exposure to self-injury in less direct or obvious ways. Your reaction to those instances would also influence the chance that you would hurt yourself.

Activity 4.5 will help you explore some of the ways you may have been exposed to SIV. Although you may not have observed and modeled these behaviors, their presence may still have affected you in some way.

Activity 4.5: How Have I Observed SIV?

1. Begin by circling each of the ways that you have had some exposure to self-inflicted violence: Add any other ways in the blanks.

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| ___ Television | ___ Movie |
| ___ Magazine | ___ Book |
| ___ Hospital | ___ Psychiatric ward |
| ___ Prison | ___ Detainment center |
| ___ Friend | ___ School |
| ___ Newspaper | ___ Newsletter |
| ___ Religious group | ___ Athletic group |
| ___ Family member | ___ Client |
| ___ Coworker | ___ Internet/computer |
| ___ | ___ |
| ___ | ___ |

2. Now go through each of the items circled, and to the left of the item put a plus sign (+) to indicate that the result of the self-injury seemed rewarding, a minus sign (-) to indicate that the result seemed negative or punishing, or an equal sign (=) to indicate that the result was neither rewarding nor punishing.

3. Look back and count how many items you circled. Then count up the plus, minus, and equal signs. Chances are, your view of SIV

matches whichever type of sign you see most often. That is, if you have mostly plus signs, you probably saw SIV used in ways that were rewarded and are likely to have tried injuring yourself to achieve similar rewards. If you have mostly minus signs or equal signs, your decision to hurt yourself was probably not influenced by modeling because what you were exposed to did not seem rewarding.

Psychodynamic Explanations

The psychodynamic perspective of psychology basically states that behavior stems from hidden forces within our personalities. According to this theory, our actions are strongly influenced by those thoughts and feelings that remain beneath our conscious awareness.

There are numerous explanations for self-inflicted violence from a psychodynamic perspective. While some of these reasons seem to make sense on an individual basis, as a general model that explains how and why SIV occurs, this theory is not particularly helpful. However, because these ideas may be useful to some people, several of these theories are discussed briefly below. Although there are many other psychodynamically oriented explanations of SIV, those presented here seem to be the most relevant and logical. Because the overall applicability of these models seems limited, further exploration of these additional explanations is not merited.

Suicide. One psychodynamic theory proposes that self-inflicted violence is a form of partial suicide, that self-injury is a wish to die and the actual behavior is a thwarted attempt at suicide. While this may be true in a few cases, it is likely that death is neither a primary nor a secondary goal of your SIV activities. In fact, you probably use SIV as a method of coping, a method of staying alive and sane. Although it is possible to cause critical injuries during an episode of SIV, this would seem more of an accidental result rather than an actual goal.

Depression. Self-inflicted violence from a psychodynamic perspective can also be viewed as an action rooted in depression. Many psychodynamic theories posit that depression is anger directed toward oneself. So from this perspective, SIV is simply an expression of this anger. While there are many ways to turn rage inward, self-injurious acts would appear to be an especially direct and potent one. Maintaining the integrity and safety of our bodies is one of our most necessary and primary tasks. By hurting your own body you are punishing yourself and communicating on a very primitive level an intense sense of the anger you have turned against yourself.

The psychodynamic interpretation of depression also encompasses a sense of helplessness or hopelessness. You choose to take these rageful emotions out on yourself because you feel either unable to direct this anger toward others or as if a direct expression of your anger would be futile or

useless. Consequently, you choose to injure yourself to express and release the anger that stems from your helplessness.

Reintegration. In addition, at a very basic level self-inflicted violence is useful as a method of reintegrating your sense of physical being. When you injure yourself you are probably experiencing some sort of disturbance in your sense of physical self, possibly stemming directly from the dissociative state that typically precedes the act of self-injury or from an earlier state of psychological distress. You may feel fragmented, zoned out, or as if you aren't all there. The act of self-injury allows you to physically reconnect with yourself and reexperience yourself as a whole, unique, living being. In psychodynamic theory, learning to differentiate yourself from others and experiencing yourself as a distinct entity are primary and essential goals of development. When you use SIV as a method of reconnecting with yourself physically, you are reinstating a sense of your boundaries and distinctness from others.

