

7 Common Myths about Self-Injury

1. **Self-harm is usually a failed suicide attempt.**

This myth persists despite a wealth of studies showing that, although people who self-injure may be at a higher risk of suicide than others, they distinguish between acts of self-harm and attempted suicide. Many, if not most, self-injuring people who make a suicide attempt use means that are completely different to their preferred methods of self-inflicted violence.

2. **People who self-injure are crazy and should be locked up.**

Tracy Alderman, Ph.D., author of *The Scarred Soul*, addressed this:

“Fear can lead to dangerous overreactions. In dealing with clients who hurt themselves, you will probably feel fear. . . . Hospitalizing clients for self-inflicted violence is one such form of overreaction. Many therapists, because they do not possess an adequate understanding of SIV, will use extreme measures to assure (they think) their clients’ best interests. However, few people who self-injure need to be hospitalized or institutionalized. The vast majority of self-inflicted wounds are neither life threatening nor require medical treatment. Hospitalizing a client involuntarily for these issues can be damaging in several ways. Because SIV is closely related to feelings of lack of control and overwhelming emotional states, placing someone in a setting that by its nature evokes these feelings is very likely to make matters worse, and may lead to an incident of SIV. In addition, involuntary hospitalization often affects the therapeutic relationship in negative ways, eroding trust, communication, rapport, and honesty. Caution should be used when assessing a client’s level of threat to self or others. In most cases, SIV is not life threatening. Because SIV is so misunderstood, clinicians often overreact and provide treatment that is contraindicated.

3. **People who self-harm are just trying to get attention.**

A wise friend once emailed me a list of attention-seeking behaviors: wearing nice clothing, smiling at people, saying “hi”, going to the check-out counter at a store, and so on. We all seek attention all the time; wanting attention is not bad or sick. If someone is in so much distress and feels so ignored that the only way he can think of to express his pain is by hurting his body, something is definitely wrong in his life and this isn’t the time to be making moral judgments about his behavior. That said, most people who self-injure go to great lengths to hide their wounds and scars. Many consider their self-harm to be a deeply shameful secret and dread the consequences of discovery.

4. **Self-inflicted violence is just an attempt to manipulate others.**
Some people use self-inflicted injuries as an attempt to cause others to behave in certain ways, it's true. Most don't, though. If you feel as though someone is trying to manipulate you with SI, it may be more important to focus on what it is they want and how you can communicate about it while maintaining appropriate boundaries. Look for the deeper issues and work on those.

5. **Only people with Borderline Personality Disorder self-harm.**
Self-harm is a criterion for diagnosing BPD, but there are 8 other equally important criteria. Not everyone with BPD self-harms, and not all people who self-harm have BPD (regardless of practitioners who automatically diagnose anyone who self-injures with BPD).

6. **If the wounds aren't "bad enough," self-harm isn't serious.**
The severity of the self-inflicted wounds has very little to do with the level of emotional distress present. Different people have different methods of SI and different pain tolerances. The only way to figure out how much distress someone is in is to ask. Never assume; check it out with the person.

7. **Only teen-aged girls self-injure.**
In five years of existence, the bodies-under-siege email list has had members of both genders, from six continents, and ranging in age from 14-60+. It's a person-who-has-no-other-way-to-cope thing, not a teenage (or female or American or whatever) thing.

Content taken from this [website](http://www.selfinjury.org/). (<http://www.selfinjury.org/>)

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