

Article

Motivation for self harm

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One of the problems in the study of self harm is everyone has their own theory. People have differing beliefs about the motives of self harm and when they find it, they tend to stick to it and apply it to all who self harm. This can lead to mis communication and confusion amongst people who study this area or work with self harmers.

My view is there are multiple motives for self harming, people can easily have more than one, they are not mutually exclusive and can change over time. It seems wiser to me if therapists be aware of their desire to find THE reason self harming and not get stuck in it. Not get stuck in the thought that all or most self harmers have the same motive. Instead one approaches the self harmer in another way:

“What do you get from self harming? It serves some psychological function for you, what is that?”.

Some self harmers will be quite aware and answer the question easily. Others are not aware of their motives and it can take some time working with them to find out what psychological benefits they derive from self harming.

In my book – Working with suicidal individuals – I asked many people this question and came up with a list of 8 motives. I am quite sure this list is not complete but it is a start and demonstrates the multiple reasons why people can self harm. And as I said people can have more than one and indeed their motives can change over time

1. Self harming as part of gang tattooing behaviour.
2. Self harming to make self feel real which can be found in those who dissociate.
3. Self harming to make self feel something.
4. Self harming used as a means of tension relief and to release pressure build up.
5. Self harming as a physical expression of emotional pain. Self harming is seen as providing concrete evidence of the pain.
6. Self harming as a means to self nurture. It allows the person to care for self as can be found in Munchausen Syndrome.
7. Self harming as a means to punish self and an expression of self hatred.
8. Self harming as a means to manipulate others or as a cry for help.

Self harmers can vary in other ways as well. Some keep their self harm very private and feel ashamed of what they do. Others are different, will be open about it and indeed one finds the internet awash with photographs of people who have self harmed, like this one:



A google image search of “Self harm” will produce literally thousands of images. These can include full photographs of such individuals and may be linked to blogs, websites or social media that can contain biographical information about the person. Self harmers are a diverse group including those who are very open about it and those who go to great lengths to hide their self harming.

This is an interesting photograph for a variety of reasons. First there is almost a rhythmic quality to some of the scarring. Regarding motives she may have started as number 3 or 4 but subsequently discovered it became a type of body art or tattooing for her (#1). Hence we can see how there can be more than one motive and how the motives can change and transform over time.

This photograph also begs the question:

Why has she allowed her self harm to be photographed and why has she put it on the internet for all to see?

Indeed we may have discovered reason #9.

To put this photograph on the internet could be an act of defiance. It is showing quite an alarming image in the face of many people. In doing this one would know they will get many a parental type of response. The Parent ego state of many people will spring into action as a consequence of viewing this photograph. That will range from the nurturing response of caring and concern to the Critical Parent response of, "Stop being an attention seeker and grow up". It is quite likely one will get both types of responses as the photograph is quite alarming to the Child ego state of the observer. Those with an active Parent ego state will then swing into action because the photograph has impacted their Child ego state.

In addition to this the posture suggests a quite rebellious attitude. If this is so, then we may have discovered reason #9, a relationship based motive. Self harm as an expression of a high level of rebellion designed to elicit people to tell her stop so she can then defy them. (Similar to the motive one finds in some eating disorders).

If this is so, then we have an instance of multiple motives (3 at least) two of which may have evolved over time as she discovered the meaning self harm has for her and the psychological needs it can meet. It is proposed here that it is better to view self harm as a fluid, changing form of psychopathology rather than a static, one reason form of pathology which one so often sees presented in the literature.