

## Commentary on a case of self harm

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This is written by a client (C1) and is produced in full and unedited. It's about some of her self harming experiences. When clients produce something like this it's like gold, as they are giving insight into their psychology 'at the coal face'. I have made comments about her statement after the quotation of C1.

"I am over forty and I still self harm at times.

I don't cut anymore. The last time I did it was eighteen months ago and, due to the prospect of alerting others to my state of mind, I have resisted since. I do not want fuss, nor do I want people to worry because it is my belief that they do not understand that it is not a problem for me. I know what I am doing. I think about it a lot, every day and more so during stressful times, when I am very low or extremely bored. To me it relieves tension and offers a strange pleasure. Some people drink wine, I like to self harm. Whether or not there is a deeper reason for it is of no interest to me. It's a comfort to me and it belongs to me.

Looking back I think it started in my teens. I could be wrong but I know I did things when I was under what I now know to be stress. These things were not normal. Nor were they good for my body.

Initially I would swallow things. Random stuff. Small marbles. Balls of paper. Closed safety pins. This happened on and off over a couple of years. It then went onto scratching my upper arms and thighs with pins. Then small nicks with the corner of a razor blade. None of these things ever left scars and that was probably due to the fact I did not want my parents to see. Not because I thought they would be concerned, the truth be known is that I knew that I would get into trouble.

None of this would have been referred to as self harm. It would have been called attention seeking. That was how such issues were treated. Looking back, it was this awareness that always made me feel extremely ashamed of being what I thought was an "attention seeker". I wasn't. I was the opposite. If I could slip away and out of sight then that is what I would do.

In my later teens and early twenties I self harmed by bulimia and food deprivation. It felt clean to be empty and thin. Eat large amounts and vomit. I really could have my cake and eat it too. Food deprivation was the holy grail of cleanliness. Being able to control myself was a form of purification. Clean, clean, clean. Light and neat and tidy. This control confirmed my worth. A pious act in itself. Food was an enemy, my body was defending itself from that food. Food issues have plagued me on and off over the years. My body was and continues to be my enemy. In my early thirties I had a two year episode of ED (eating disorder). Being thin and losing weight is held up as important as a cure for cancer and worthy of a Nobel Peace prize. At least that is the feeling one gets when one is in the thick of it. It feels good to be clean and controlled. When I think about it the main feeling I have is a wistful nostalgia for that tumultuous time of my life.

As the eating problems in my early twenties settled down it was replaced by a more manageable form of self harm. I would use a belt to strap my back. It took away any

anxiety I felt. Not for long but long enough for me to get some peace. The sound and rhythm of the belt hitting my bare skin was a great comfort to me and in those days I would do it often. It seemed normal even though it was a secret. There were times when I would be left with residual pain that could last for a few days. When that happened I would have a break. I would also enjoy the feeling. That lingering pain was a comfort to me when I was talking to people. It was my secret and they did not know and never would. It was a reminder of somehow I had made amends for the awful person that I believed myself to be.

Over the years this urge to self flagellate has waxed and waned. Having two children put it on hold as I was focused on their well being more than anything. The only thing that mattered was being a good parent to the children of mine. To make up for things. To make amends. Out of the role of motherhood came a peaceful time.

It's been in my thirties that the turbulence resurfaced. It would be quite reasonable to say that during that time I have spent years living in a parallel world within myself. There is the world that I function in. The mother, the wife and employee. All of which are relatively satisfying for me. But it is that other self that causes the trouble. The never ending desire to cause myself some level of pain. To mark my body. To show myself that I am strong and in control.

It's somehow evolved into a sexual activity. Not that I do it with that thought at the start, it just kind of develops. More pain means more feeling. More feeling is exciting. Then that is somehow sexual.

Last year when I last went through a phase of cutting my arms it was such a compelling act. Sitting in the car parked in a side street and thinking about it was the start. The level of anxiety was high but it felt good (unlike most anxiety). I had (and still have) in my glove box a pair of dog grooming scissors which are perfect for cutting skin. They are more effective than normal household scissors. Not much effort is required to make a cut that bleeds well. It's the initial pain that relieves most of the tension. There was always a feeling of trepidation and perhaps even fear and I would press the sharp edge of the scissors on the skin ready for the cut. Then I would just draw it down the arm. Maybe only two or three inches. If there was not enough blood I would do it again. Repeat the process until the blood started to run a bit. After that I would use a tissue to carefully clean the skin. It was this act that brought forth strong sexual feelings. Purely physical. Just a surge of it through my body. I can only think that it was the intensity of what I was doing that caused that. It ended up that each time I cut myself the anticipation became a mix of sexual feelings and anxiety. It was addictive actually. I used to wonder what it would be like to masturbate straight after cutting. If I could have managed it I would have but it was just physically impossible.

In the days that passed I would like looking at my arms. They looked beautiful to me. The angry and red lines scabbed over and eventually faded to pale scars. I can still see them and that is some comfort to me as I feel such a loss that I had to stop. If they faded away I would be quite sad. Like losing part of me I think.

When I had to cease doing it (under duress) it was very, very hard to stop. I had kept handfuls of blood soaked tissues hidden in the car and would take them out and look at them. By that time the blood had turned brown and eventually I threw them out. But I did take photos of the tissues and recently I found one of the photos on my lap top and the blood on the tissue was fresh and bright, (See photograph below). I felt as delighted as

one could be finding a nice photo from a holiday. Before I deleted it from my photo stream I saved it as a picture on my phone background so that I could look at it every day. It is as close as I can get to being in the privacy of my car doing what I like.

Since I can no longer cut myself I have found another way to feed that urge. I have gone back to strapping myself. Not as much as I would like but often enough to feel I am satisfying the impulse. And getting all those feelings rushing through me.

Using a belt on myself is a very meditative act. I can go very hard without leaving too much on show. It is easy to hide. If I use the right belt I can get a very good visual result. If I do it hard enough it will hurt for days and, as mentioned before, this is a reminder of my "making amends" by punishing myself. It's a way of relieving the stress of being human and having feelings that I don't like. It's a deserving self expression. The preparation, the finding of an opportunity to do it and the actual act itself is all part of it. And, that too, has a sexual aspect to it.

The pain factor is the best part. Even when having tattoos done on my body, it was the pain that was the best (and worst) part of the event. Each time I look at the tattoos I not only recall where my headspace was at, I also recall the exquisite and intense pain that went with it.

For me now, self harm isn't a bad thing. It is a way of relieving stress, it is something I like doing to my body. It heightens my senses and belongs to me. I don't think I would ever stop. It's controllable and enjoyable. Puts me in touch with myself. I'd find it hard to not do it and honestly cannot see a valid reason to not to it.

I just wish I had more time and more "open window" times to do it." (end quote)



## Commentary

There are some interesting features in this statement. First one must highlight the difference between suicide and self harm as this is a common area of misconception. Many tend to see self harm as a suicidal act to some degree but they are quite different psychological phenomena. This is understandable. If a parent sees a teenager who has cut their arm it is easy to understand how they might view that as suicidal act. However this is not so and in White (2011) I list eight common psychological motives for self harming:

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.

None of these are about suicide and in C1's statement she never refers to or even alludes to anything suicidal. Instead she states:

"It's the initial pain that relieves most of the tension."

This indicates that she has motive number four on the list. It's a way for her to self soothe. She may also have some of motive six as she does indicate it is a kind of self nurturing act. Having said this there are three groups of people

Those who self harm and have no suicidal urges.  
Those who have suicidal urges and no urge to self harm.  
Those who have suicidal urges and urges to self harm.

However from a treatment perspective, in my view it is better to see them as quite separate psychological phenomena. It allows for clearer treatment planning.

The usual list of forms of self harm include:

Cutting

Burning

Hitting self - head banging, punching walls, hitting self with an implement or fist

Picking at self

Wound tampering

Sticking needles in self

However C1 says she started off by swallowing things, "Small marbles. Balls of paper. Closed safety pins." She sees this as the beginning of her self harm which then evolved into other forms. Perhaps she has articulated another form of self harming that the literature does not usually include.

There is a condition known as Pica which is the persistent eating of non nutritive and non food products. This tends to occur in conditions like schizophrenia and intellectual disability but the literature does not tend to see it as a form of self harming. Perhaps C1 was demonstrated that it can be. It is also interesting that she later developed an eating disorder.

Also of interest is her comment about motherhood:

“Having two children put it on hold as I was focused on their well being more than anything.”

She stopped self harming when she had young children. From a treatment point of view this is most interesting. What was it that changed in her ego states or psychology that allowed her to go through a period of not self harming and seemingly not having to resist the urges as well?

If we can articulate the change that occurred in her, can we then facilitate similar changes in the psyche of the self harmer who is not a mother of young children? If this is possible then we may have new treatment strategies for psychotherapy with self harmer.

C1 also shows how she has sexualised the self harming:

“It's somehow evolved into a sexual activity. Not that I do it with that thought at the start, it just kind of develops. More pain means more feeling. More feeling is exciting. Then that is somehow sexual.”

This woman has a history of masochistic sexual behaviour. She finds it erotic to inflict pain on her self and to have another person inflict physical pain upon her as well as sexually degrade and humiliate her. This may provide some insight into the psychological motives behind masochistic sexual behaviour where for some it is the same as self harming. In her case it is a way to self soothe and relieve tension. I suspect that those who do engage in masochistic forms of sex may have a variety of other motives but C1 has shown us that perhaps some are doing it as a form of self harm where the person taking the sadistic role in the sex is seen as just another way to achieve self soothing. The “self” harming in sexual behaviour can also be ‘others’ harming for the same psychological result.

Finally C1 raises an interesting philosophical question about self harming with her comment:

“For me now, self harm isn't a bad thing.”

It's not going to kill her and she finds it works as a way to self soothe. Is there anything wrong with the self harming acts? Are we pathologising a piece of behaviour which we don't like the look of, but may not actually be pathological for the individual.

Reference

White, T. (2011)

Working with Suicidal Individuals. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.