Understanding Non-Suicidal Self-Injury in Teens

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Objectives

- Understand non-suicidal self-injurious behavior (NSSI)
- Discuss common motivations underlying non-suicidal self-injurious behavior in teens
- Review strategies for assessing NSSI
What is Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI)?

- NSSI is any physically self-damaging act performed:
  without intent of killing oneself
  with full intent of inflicting physical harm to oneself (O'Carroll et al., 1996)

- Examples:
  - scratching
  - cutting
  - burning
How Common is NSSI in Adolescents?

14-39% of community adolescent samples

40-60% of adolescent psychiatric samples

Darche 1990; Ross & Heath, 2002
Favazza & Conterio, 1989
Which Adolescents Engage in NSSI?

- Most often begins in early adolescence

- Associated with:
  - Axis I diagnoses (63% externalizing, 52% internalizing, 60% substance use disorders)
  - Axis II diagnoses (67%; primarily cluster B)

- No sex, race or SES differences

For a review, see Nock 2009
Characteristics of NSSI in Adolescents

- 89% report thinking about NSSI for a few minutes or less before engaging in the behavior (Nock & Prinstein, 2004)
- 80% report experiencing little to no pain during NSSI
- 18% endorse alcohol or drug use during NSSI
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Why Do Adolescents Engage in NSSI?

Overwhelmingly, teens report they engage in self-injury to escape or reduce painful emotions:

- to cope with feelings of depression: 83%
- to release unbearable tension: 74%
- to cope with nervousness/fear: 71%
- to express frustration: 71%

Nixon et al., 2002
Other reasons adolescents report for engaging in NSSI:

- to feel something, even if it was pain (34%)
- to punish oneself (31%)
- to get other people to act differently or change (15%)
- to get attention (14%)
- to get help (14%)

Nock & Prinstein, 2004
Why do Adolescents Engage in NSSI?

The behavior is reinforced (i.e., it works)…

- 60% report emotional relief afterwards (Kumar et al., 2004; Nock & Prinstein, 2004)
- social reinforcement
  e.g., attention, help, removal of expectations/demands
NSSI and suicidal behavior commonly co-occur in teens
- 70% of teens who engage in NSSI report lifetime history of suicidal behavior

NSSI as risk factor for suicidal behavior
- longer history of NSSI
- more methods
- absence of physical pain during NSSI

Nock et al., 2006
Suicide Continuum

Passive death wish  Suicidal ideation no method  Suicidal ideation with plan

Suicidal Ideation

Non-suicidal self-injury

Suicide Attempt  Completed Suicide

Brent et al., 1988
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Assessing NSSI: General Guidelines

- An ongoing process
- Do not be afraid to ask direct questions about self-harm
- Begin with general questions, move to more specific
- Be gently persistent in seeking details
Assessing NSSI: Create a Validating Environment

Levels of Validation (Linehan, 1993; Miller & Comtois, 2002)

- Unbiased listening and observing
- Accurate reflection
- Articulating the “unverbalized”
- Validation in terms of past learning or biological dysfunction
- Validation in terms of present context
- Radical genuineness
The Importance of Maintaining a Non-Judgmental Approach

- Therapist validates the emotional need behind the behavior
  
  AND

- Elicits consequences about specific problem behaviors from the teen

- All in a non-judgmental manner, e.g.:
  “You’re doing the best you can, and you can do better”  
  (Linehan, 1993)
A chain analysis is a detailed assessment of any behavior.

Often our patients have difficulty identifying precipitants or contributing factors for their NSSI. (“I don’t know why I cut, I just did”)

The chain helps orient the teen to the idea that NSSI, like all behaviors, happens for valid reasons – even if we are not initially aware of those reasons.

The chain helps you and the teen make sense of NSSI. This can help the teen develop a better sense of control.
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

- Start by asking teen to describe in detail the events (both internal and external) that led up to the most recent incident of NSSI

- As the teen tells the story, the clinician records the details on paper as a way of really seeing the chain of events

- Goal: to recreate the day in such detail that it is as if watching a movie of the events of the day

Brent, Poling & Goldstein, 2011
Stanley et al., 2009
Chain Analysis

What was the problem behavior?
For each link below, consider:
- Events
- Thoughts
- Feelings

What were your vulnerability factors?

What were your protective factors?

What were the consequences?

From: Treating Depressed and Suicidal Adolescents by David A. Brent, Kimberly D. Poling, and Tina R. Goldstein. Copyright 2011 by the Guilford Press
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

Figure out the problem you are targeting (i.e., self-injury)

• Choose a specific incident of the behavior

• Preferable to choose a recent incident

Brent, Poling & Goldstein, 2011
Stanley et al., 2009
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

Prompt for:

**Thoughts:**  What were you thinking?  
What went through your head?

**Feelings:**  How were you feeling?  
What kind of a mood were you in?  
What did you notice in your body?

**Behaviors:**  What did you do?  
How did you act?

**Vulnerabilities:**  Why then?  
Consider sleep, eating, prior events

**Consequences:**  What happened afterwards?  
Consider reinforcement and punishment
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

While you go through the chain together:

- notice the chain of events moment-to-moment over time
- highlight, observe patterns, and comment on implications

Brent, Poling & Goldstein, 2011
Stanley et al., 2009
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

- Identify on the chain the “point of no return”
- Determine how to “break links” between prompting event and “point of no return”
- Identify ways to “break links” between problem behavior and consequences
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

- Review the chain carefully with the teen

- Ask: “what emotional **NEEDS** were you attempting to meet through the behavior, even if the results were not what you might have wanted?”

Brent, Poling & Goldstein, 2011
Stanley et al., 2009
How to Conduct a Chain Analysis

- Explore with the teen how he/she feels about having the identified emotional needs
- Help the teen develop respect for his/her emotional needs
- Foster self-validation of emotional needs
- Explore alternative ways he/she can go about getting his/her needs met

Brent, Poling & Goldstein, 2011
Stanley et al., 2009
Summary

- NSSI as distinct from suicidal behavior
  - and also a risk factor for suicidal behavior

- NSSI serves a function for the teen

- Use of chain analysis to understand NSSI
  - triggers
  - vulnerability factors
  - emotional needs
  - consequences
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Resources

