

Self-harm / Forgiving Yourself

Tammy: It's hard to believe! People hurt themselves on purpose? They cut themselves or burn or punch or pierce themselves, or starve themselves? Why would anyone do that?

Carol: Let's ask them- and then let's talk about this thing called self-harming. Hello, and welcome to Women of Hope. I'm Carol...

Tammy: ... and I'm Tammy. I hope you're having a good day, and we can spend some time together. Today we'll talk about a difficult topic, self-harm. Our counselor Fran is here too, to help us to think about why people do this.

Fran: Hello my friends. Yes, most people can't understand why anyone would hurt themselves on purpose. But in my work I've met hundreds of people who do this, and most of them are women or girls. When I ask why they harm themselves, these are the sorts of things they say.

Woman 1: It helps me get out the feelings and the pain that I feel inside me, when I can't put it into words.

Woman 2: It's a way I can control my body, because I can't control anything else in my life. I get bullied at school and abused at home. But I feel powerful when I cut myself.

Woman 3: Often I feel nothing. It's like I'm not really alive. It's better to feel pain than to feel nothing. And after I hurt myself I feel relieved, I don't feel so anxious for a while.

Woman 1: I feel like I'm a really bad person and I deserve to be punished. Cutting myself lets the badness out. Sometimes I hear voices that tell me to hurt myself or kill myself, and they don't stop until I do hurt myself.

Fran: Can you understand these young women? They have all these bad feelings- they feel angry, empty, guilty... sad, afraid... and they hate themselves. Often they've been hurt by others, maybe when they were children. Hurting themselves makes them feel better- but only for a short time. The pain comes back. I feel so sorry for them.

Tammy: So do I- it sounds a terrible way to live.

Carol: Do they do it to get attention?

Fran: Sometimes it can be a way to show their family, or their doctor, how bad things are. But mostly people who hurt themselves keep it a secret, so they feel very lonely, worthless... and trapped.

Tammy: Do they really want to die?

Fran: They might feel suicidal sometimes, but usually self-harm is a way to *cope* rather than a way to die.

Carol: I'm thinking there are other ways to hurt yourself. It might not be attacking your body, it might be risky behavior like getting drunk, taking drugs, or having unsafe sex. Things that make you feel alive for the moment, but awful afterwards.

Fran: Yes, that's true. So if someone you care about acts like this, they might do it to harm themselves. What would you look for if you suspect your friend or your child is hurting herself?

Tammy: I guess you might see strange wounds or scars. Someone might suddenly start to have a lot of 'little accidents'.

Carol: I remember a girl who always wore long sleeves even in summer, and it turned out she used to cut herself, and then pick at the scars to stop them healing. She hardly ate anything, and got very thin.

Fran: You might notice a family member washing their clothes more often, or they might have blades or knives in their room. Young people often start listening to very dark music about death or violence, and spend a lot of time alone. Let me say- if you see signs of self-harming, don't give up hope, don't blame or punish them, but *do* reach out in love.

Carol: We've been talking about why some people hurt themselves. Fran, what would you say to a person like this?

Fran: I'd want to say, 'You're not alone, and you don't deserve this. It's like an illness, and you need help to get better. You *can* learn better ways to deal with your problems.'

First, you need to work out *why* you harm yourself. Does it help you release stress? Does it help you to feel in control...or express your feelings...or let you feel *something*? You do it for a reason, so it's good to know what the reason is, so you can meet that need in another way.

Tammy: If it helps you feel better, why should you stop, Fran?

Fran: You do feel relief for a little while, but self-harm causes many more problems. You probably feel ashamed, and you're not really dealing with the *reason* you're so unhappy. You have to keep it a *secret* and that means you feel lonely. It can easily become *addictive*, like a drug, and soon it's controlling you and you need to do it more and more. You can easily go too far and end up with a serious medical problem. And if you don't learn good ways to deal with your pain, you can get depressed or get addicted to drugs or alcohol. As a young person you can lose those years when you need to be finishing school, starting your work, and making relationships.

Tammy: So self-harm doesn't help you with the real problems. What *should* you do?

Carol: I think you should find someone you trust to talk to.

Fran: Yes indeed...that would be the first step. Talk to a doctor, a family member, a wise friend... a church leader, a teacher; someone who will support you, not blame you. It's more important to share your *feelings* rather than the details of your self-harm. Take it slowly, and give them time to understand, because it might be a shock to them. You might feel worse at first because you've put the bad feelings into words, but it will be a relief to share your feelings.

Tammy: You know, you can always talk to God about your feelings.

Fran: That's right. God won't judge you or abandon you, he'll always be there to hear your deepest secrets.

Here are some other steps. You need to learn what *emotions* you feel, and what they're about. Is the feeling more like sadness, or anger, or fear? What sort of things set off these feelings? It can be hard to pay attention to your feelings instead of numbing them or expressing them through self-harm. But emotions come and go. Don't fight them, but learn to understand them.

What's the first warning sign *in your body* when you're getting distressed? Learn to listen to your body- you might feel very tense, or your heart might beat hard, you feel sick or sweaty, or your breathing becomes fast and shallow and your head feels cloudy. The very first thing is to control your

breathing- slow it down, make sure you breathe out properly, and think about your breaths.

Then, try to pay attention to something ordinary, like looking at the sky and noticing the weather. Maybe go for a quick walk. Tell yourself the truth- you can get through this, it will pass. It really will, if you don't tell yourself that you can't cope.

Carol: OK, that would help to slow down the urge to hurt yourself. You talked before about learning good ways to deal with your pain. Any ideas?

Fran: Well, if you cut yourself to *express your emotions*, you could paint or draw on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint. Or you could write down your feelings, then tear up the paper if you want to. Or tell your support person what you feel, and ask them just to listen.

If you cut to *calm and soothe yourself*, maybe take a bath or hot shower, play with a pet, make a nice drink, or listen to calming music. What helps you to calm down?

If you cut because you feel *disconnected and numb*, try to talk to a friend about something pleasant. Or you could do something that feels strong- maybe hold an ice cube, or chew something with a very strong taste, like chilli peppers, peppermint, or a lemon.

Tammy: What about if you feel very tense or angry?

Fran: Well, take some breaths, then exercise vigorously—run, dance, or hit a pillow; or tear up an old magazine, or scream into your pillow. Get out that tension!

And if you really, really want to cut, try doing one of these things instead: draw on yourself, where you would have cut, with a red marker; or rub some ice on that spot, or get a rubber band and flick it at that part of yourself. But I hope that after a while of talking through your feelings, you won't need to do these things. I really hope you can find a proper counsellor who understands these things, and who you feel safe with. It will take some time, but the more you can be honest, the better they can help you.

And don't forget; the best person to talk to is God. Ask him for help, and ask him to show you who to talk to. That would be a great first step.

Carol: Perhaps you think someone you know is harming themselves. First you need to think about *why* you are concerned, and then try to understand how they feel. Maybe just tell them what you've noticed and say you want to understand and help.

Fran: Yes. It doesn't help to judge or threaten them to try to make them stop; they already feel terrible about themselves. They need your love and support to get better!

Carol: Were you shocked to hear about people harming themselves? Actually, one of our dear Women of Hope friends has had this experience. Stevie's been brave and told us her story.

This is what she wrote:

'Have you ever been *shocked* at your own behavior...when you've done something wrong, that you thought you would never ever do...? Have you ever felt really *ashamed* about something you've done? I have. And I want to share my story with you, so I can tell you about how kind God was to me, and how he forgave me, and helped me to forgive myself.

'I was taking some medication for three years. The tablets were for depression, but I was feeling much happier, so my doctor and I decided that I could stop taking them. It can actually be really hard to stop taking medication, because your body gets used to it. Your body can become unbalanced for

a while, as it adjusts to working *without* the medication. Sometimes you have to cut the amount of medication back very slowly, before you stop taking it. So that means you should talk to a doctor, or healthcare worker, before changing how much medication you take.

'But you know, even though I slowly reduced my medication, over a few weeks, it was still very difficult. The first couple of weeks weren't too bad – I just had some tension in my muscles, tummy pain, and headaches. But it got really tough when I was taking the last little bit, and for the first few weeks when I wasn't taking anything at all. I felt irritable and unhappy. I wasn't sleeping well, and I didn't care about things that I'm usually interested in. And when I felt angry, and powerless, I suddenly felt that I wanted to harm myself. I hurt myself a few times, and I often *thought* about it and *wanted* to do it more often. It helped me to get my anger out, and to feel better...for a little while.

'I was surprised at how kind God was to me during this time. I still felt close to him, and felt him comforting me, and helping me to make a bit more sense of what was happening...as I was quite confused. Sometimes I even thought that there was nothing wrong with what I was doing. So one night I asked God to let me know if hurting myself was wrong. The next morning, I remembered some words from God's Word the Bible.

'These words are in Colossians ch3 v17. They say: "whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father." (New Living Translation)

'Immediately I knew that I couldn't thank God for harming myself. You know, in this world God has given us many things to enjoy, and to help us cope. I knew that self-harm was not one of them.

'At that moment, I decided that I wanted to stop harming myself. But that wasn't easy to do. The temptation to harm was very strong, so I had to fight very hard not to do it. I asked God to help me to resist, because I knew that I couldn't stop without his help. I hurt myself one more time, as I struggled, and asked God to help me to stop.

'I was also surprised at how kind my family and close friends were to me. They never spoke harshly to me. They just tried to understand and support me, and help me to look for a better way of coping with my pain. That reminded me that God wasn't judging me. He wanted to help me through my pain.

'In a few weeks I started feeling like my normal self. My body had become used to working without that medication. It was then that I felt really bad about what I'd done. I told God that I was so sorry, and I knew that God forgave me. You see, I knew that God's Word, the Bible tells me...tells all of us...that God sent his son Jesus into the world, to die on a cross...to take the punishment for our sins. He did this so that we didn't have to be punished, and God could forgive us.

'I knew that God had forgiven me...I kept reminding myself of that, but I didn't forgive myself. I do a lot of public speaking, and I thought that God should stop giving me opportunities to do that. When I speak, people see me as an inspiration...an example to follow... and I knew that self-harming was *not* a good example to follow. But God continued to give me opportunities to speak to groups of people. I thought that God was being too good to me...that he should have punished me in some way.

'Then one day I was reading a part of God's Word, the Bible, that tells us not to judge others. That's because God is the judge of the world - that's *his* job. And I thought, "That includes ourselves. I don't have the right to judge myself, because that's God's job."

Then I read this from God's Word, the Bible:

"Or perhaps you despise his great kindness, tolerance, and patience." (Romans 2:4 Good News

Translation)

'Now that *really* made me stop and think!

'Of course! It's God's right to be kind and gracious to me, whether I think he should be, or not. And he *has* forgiven me. I need to *accept* that.

'At that moment, I felt that I let go of my shame... that I forgave myself. But later, I found myself struggling again. Have you ever let something go...forgiven someone...maybe even yourself, or you've given something to God to take care of... you've let something go, but soon you find that you're struggling with that same thing again? I think we've all done that.

'I was still struggling with the dark things that were in my heart, the things I don't understand about myself. Then God reminded me that *he is changing* me. He's changing my heart to make me more like him. And God is perfectly good and loving. I felt like God showed me that I can look at myself with *hope*...at who I am *becoming*. God is making me more and more like himself. And one day, in heaven, he will finish his work, and there won't be any more wrong things in my heart.'

Tammy: Carol just read Stevie's words to us about learning to forgive herself. That's an important lesson for us to learn. We should learn from our mistakes, but we don't have to go on punishing ourselves, when God has forgiven us.

Fran: Stevie showed me some scars from where she hurt herself. They've healed now, but she told me, 'The scars remind me of how kind God was, not how I failed.'

Let me read you some words from Micah, one of the prophets in the Bible. He wrote this prayer: 'O Lord: you forgive the sins of your people... You take pleasure in showing us your constant love... You will trample our sins underfoot and send them to the bottom of the sea.' (Micah 7:19 GNB)

Carol: And when God throws our sins into the deepest ocean, we shouldn't go fishing to bring them up again. Let's just give thanks to God for being so kind, and ask him to make us more like him. Fran, say those words together again.

Fran: / will trample our sins underfoot and send them to the bottom of the sea.'

Carol: When God forgives, our sins are *really gone for good!* How wonderful!

Tammy: It's time for us to say goodbye. Would you like to tell us something about *your* story? We'd love to hear from you. We do hope you will be with us again. Have a great week filled with God's blessings.

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