



Common Reasons For Superficial Cutting

It can be very helpful for a counselor to know the most common reasons actual clients have given for superficial cutting. These reasons can be thought of as fitting into one of three broad categories. The first category relates to clients attempting to manage and cope with their own overwhelming experience of emotional distress. Superficial cutting turns that emotional pain into physical injury. That experience releases endorphins and other neuro-chemicals that change the client's state of mind.

Reacting to / Managing Emotional Distress:

- Turning emotional pain into physical pain. Physical injury causes changes in brain chemistry. The physical pain triggers the release of endorphins and other brain chemicals that change the client's state-of-mind. Even when there's little physical pain, observing your own injury can do the same thing..
- Attempting to influence others. The superficial cutting is a way to communicate to other people that help is needed. The cutting is a dramatic non-verbal way to communicate the extreme extent of their emotional distress, and to then receive nurturing attention.
- Punish self or others. The self-injury is a way to receive deserved punishment or to punish someone else, such as parents or anyone else who will predictably become upset when they learn about the incident.
- Manage feelings of disassociation. Overwhelming feelings of numbness, unreality, or undefined anxiety are ended by the brain chemistry changes triggered by physical injury.
- Ending suicidal ideation. Some clients have found that when they become stuck in a cognitive loop of suicidal ideation that self-injury snaps them out of it.

The two other broad categories for superficial cutting are more likely to be addressed in individual or group therapy, rather than by a counselor processing a recent incident.

Nevertheless, it can be helpful for a counselor to be aware of these other common reasons.

Superficial Cutting as a Positive Experience:

- Comfort or enjoyment. Some clients reportedly find the chemical changes triggered by superficial cutting to feel comforting or even enjoyable.
- Sensation seeking. Some clients seek the feelings of excitement that can accompany superficial cutting.
- Experimenting. Especially for first-time cutters, some clients have heard about the behavior and are curious to experience it for themselves.
- Protecting self or others. Some clients develop a delusional belief that the cutting somehow protects them from other harm or somehow protects their loved ones. It is



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possible that such a belief be based on actual traumatic experience as well; for example, abuse that stopped once the bleeding started.

- Personal Mastery: Some clients report a feeling of being especially in control of themselves when engaging in superficial cutting.

Superficial Cutting as a Source of Personal Identity:

- Defining character – some clients express believing that it shows how tough and how strong they are. It makes them feel powerful.
- Responding to sexuality – a small percentage of clients identified superficial cutting as relating to a sexual feeling, associating the self-injury with past sexual experiences.
- Validation – some clients expressed feeling that the cutting proves the legitimacy and power of their feelings.
- Belonging to a subculture – some clients felt a sense of belonging to a group that engages in self-harm rituals.
- Having a personal language – some clients experience a cutting episode as bringing up good past feelings or memories. The cutting has a personal meaning to them.

Explaining the How the Brain Reacts to Non-Suicidal Self-Injury:

- People can, temporarily, use physical pain or injury to get rid of emotional pain. Physical pain or injury causes the body and the brain to produce chemicals that dull the physical pain, are automatically triggered by injury, and are also highly distracting. The person stops paying so much attention to their emotional pain. Some of these brain chemicals have an addictive quality causing an effect that feels like a huge relief or even feels good to the person.
- For a little while, those changes in the person's state-of-mind make them feel much better emotionally. However, those chemical brain changes wear off and the emotional pain returns, plus the person now also feels bad about how they chose to handle their distress.
- Even though the brain changes are temporary, the self-injurious behavior works quickly and dramatically, So it can easily become a habitual way of coping with overwhelmingly strong feelings of distress or with an overwhelming numbing of feelings. It becomes a very powerful trap that can go on for years.
- Using physiological resets, like face-washing and breathing exercises, combined with using coping activities, will not work as quickly or as dramatically. But these things will greatly help a person to tolerate overwhelming feelings. Over time, practicing regulating and tolerating negative feelings will help those feelings to become less intense or even go away. Most people will become proud of having learned how to handle their strong feelings in a positive fashion.