

# EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT & INTERVENTION WITH YOUTH STRUGGLING WITH SELF-INJURY

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## ISSUE IMPORTANCE:

*“Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) occurs in up to 20% of adolescents and represents a risk factor for suicidal behavior; although, many who engage in NSSI are not suicidal. Suicide attempts and deaths continue to rise within adolescents across the United States and represents the 2nd leading cause of death in this age group. The high rates of NSSI and suicidal thoughts/behaviors requires that the professionals who work with adolescents are knowledgeable about these behaviors and equipped to provide best-practice care to help reduce and manage risk.”*



## KEY TAKEAWAYS: UNDERSTANDING & ASSESSING FOR NSSI

### TO ACCURATELY IDENTIFY NSSI, THE FOLLOWING MUST BE PRESENT:

- A person must be purposefully inflicting injury upon oneself.
- That injury must result in immediate tissue damage (e.g., a cut or burn).
- It must be done without suicidal intent.
- It must not be socially approved within one’s culture, nor can it be intended for display (e.g., tattoos or piercings).

### YOUTH ENGAGE IN NSSI FOR VARIOUS REASONS, INCLUDING:

- **Physiological reasons** – to reduce arousal, to feel ‘real’ or ‘alive’, and/or to create a different state.
- **Affective reasons** – to manage intense emotion and feel in control.
- **Cognitive reasons** – to respond to self-criticism, create distraction or improve concentration, and/or to deal with flashbacks.
- **Interpersonal** – to affect social relationships in some way.
- **Environmental** – to change their physical or psychological environment.



**THE UNDERLYING MOTIVATION IS GENERALLY TO MAKE ONESELF FEEL BETTER: A FORM OF COPING WITH LIFE’S STRESSORS.**

| RISK FACTOR                                      | ASSESSMENT SCALE  | ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS   |
|--|---|--|
| 1) Frequency of NSSI                             | <b>Low:</b> 1-10, <b>Mod:</b> 11-20, <b>High:</b> 21-50   | How often do you feel like you want to self-injure?<br>Do you act on those feelings all of the time or only some of the time?<br>How many times would you say you’ve intentionally injured yourself?   |
| 2) Versatility of methods                        | <b>Low:</b> 1-2 methods, <b>Mod:</b> 3, <b>High:</b> 4-5  | Have you tried other ways of injuring yourself? What’s your preferred method to self-injure? When that’s not possible, what have you done?<br>You have self-injured several times in recent weeks. What did you do?  |
| 3) Underlying motivation + effectiveness of NSSI | <b>Low:</b> Fleeting self-hate + NSSI effective<br><b>Mod:</b> Occasional self-hate + NSSI effective sometimes<br><b>High:</b> Frequent self-hate + NSSI rarely effective | In addition to managing emotions, what else does NSSI do for you?<br>How good was the self-injury in helping you feel better?<br>Are you still getting the same relief from injuring yourself that you did the first couple of times?<br>How are you usually feeling when you self-injure?<br>What thoughts are you having when you injure yourself? |
| 4) Severity                                      | <b>Low:</b> Superficial, <b>Mod:</b> Scarring, <b>High:</b> Med. attn. needed   | Can you care for your injuries yourself or do could you have benefitted from medical care? Do you sometimes ‘go too far’ and injure yourself worse than intended? Have any of your injuries resulted in scars?   |
| 5) Location                                      | <b>Low:</b> arms/wrists, <b>Mod:</b> inner legs, thigh, calf, <b>High:</b> face, artery, genitals   | Where on your body do you self-injure?<br>Do you try to stay away from more vulnerable spots, like veins/arteries?<br>Do you ever injure yourself on your legs, face, or genitals?   |

**Because NSSI may indicate the presence of suicidal behavior (ideation or attempts), youth should be screened & referred to specialized care when necessary.**



# RESOURCES & TIPS

FOR RESPONDING TO & TREATING NSSI:

INTERVENTIONS SHOULD FOCUS ON COLLABORATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT (WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE) & THE MOTIVATION BEHIND THE NSSI IS KEY.

***The following may help you process through an episode of NSSI to determine alternative behaviors and evaluate the effectiveness of those alternatives:***

- Identify the factors that increased the likelihood of NSSI use. *For example, a lack of sleep, feeling unwell and/or tired may make one less able to cope with additional life stressors.*
- Identify the event that prompted the self-injury, such as a fight with a friend, getting yelled at by a teacher, or failing an assignment.
  - *This is a type of “last straw” event that triggers intense thoughts and emotions.*
- Identify the motivation to engage in NSSI. *For example, putting a stop to experiencing the intense emotions and/or redirecting/silencing the intrusive thoughts.*
- Identify the NSSI ultimately used to cope with the feelings.
- Craft alternative behaviors to try in place of the NSSI utilized and gain a commitment to trying at least one of those things before resorting to self-injury.
- Study the effectiveness of the alternative behavior used each time it is tried.

**Building skills in other areas can help NSSI:**



- **Focus on meeting physical and emotional needs:**
  - Set goals for getting enough sleep, choosing healthy foods, exercising more, limiting screen time, and/or paying more attention to the positive things in life.
- **Increase emotional awareness:**
  - Help to identify the various emotions one may experience.
  - Connect the dots between one’s emotions, thoughts, feelings in the body, and behaviors.
  - Find ways to practice self-compassion.
- **Challenge and/or reframe negative thinking:**
  - Ask questions such as, “How might someone else think about this? Is there another way to view this? Is there something to learn from this experience?”
- **Build interpersonal skills:**
  - Increase connections to healthy peers and adults.
  - Practice asking for and receiving help, as well as being helpful.
- **Find ways to manage stress:**
  - Label stressors as “Little deals, middle deals, or big deals” and identify different strategies for addressing each kind, including how much assistance from others is needed.

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