

The New York Times Learning Network Lesson Plan

Developed in Partnership with The Bank Street College of Education in New York City <http://www.nytimes.com/learning>

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Coping Without Cutting

Discussing Strategies for Coping with Emotional Stress

Related New York Times Article "*The Growing Wave of Teenage Self-Injury*", By JANE E. BRODY, May 6, 2008

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Grades: 6-8, 9-12

Subjects: Health, Language Arts

Overview of Lesson Plan: In this lesson, students reflect on the increase in self-injuring, specifically "cutting," among teens and then participate in a written discussion to identify and discuss healthy methods of coping with emotional stress. Finally, they conduct further research and write a mock dialogue.

Suggested Time Allowance: 1 hour

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Complete statements about emotions and reflect on responses.
2. Learn about the rising trend of cutting by reading and discussing the article "The Growing Wave of Teenage Self-Injury."
3. Participate in a written discussion on emotional stress and coping strategies.

4. Research more about self-injury and write a mock dialogue describing how they might help a friend in need.

Resources / Materials:

- pens/pencils
- classroom board
- student journals
- index cards (one per student)
- chalk or markers, enough for students to share
- large sheets of poster paper (optional; see main activity)
- copies of the article "The Growing Wave of Teenage Self-Injury," found online at http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080506tuesday.html (one per student)

Activities / Procedures:

NOTE TO TEACHER: This lesson examines the rising trend of "cutting," a form of self-injury, among adolescents. Be aware that students in the class may have personal experiences with cutting and/or know of someone who has inflicted harm or injury to themselves. Remind students to be respectful and considerate of the feelings and emotions of others as they discuss this personal and extremely sensitive topic.

1. WARM-UP/DO NOW: Prior to class, write the following incomplete statements and prompt on the board:

" ... is a way to have control over something in my life."

" ... expresses feelings that I'm unable to put into words."

"I feel relieved and less anxious after ... "

"What do think these individuals are describing? How might these statements be completed?"

As students enter the classroom, provide each with an index card and direct them to write an anonymous response to the prompt on the card. Tell students that responses will be collected and read aloud so that they do not inadvertently include any information that might reveal their identity.

After a few minutes, collect the index cards from students, shuffle them and read them aloud in a random order. Discuss the answers with students. Ask: What did

you notice about the responses? Did most of you say the same thing, or is there a variety of responses? Why do you think this is? How would you categorize the responses? Are you surprised by any of the responses? If so, which ones, and why?

Tell students that these are some of the reasons young people have given for self-injuring, often called "cutting." Explain that they will now read an article about this phenomenon, which is becoming increasingly common among teens.

2. As a class, read and discuss the article "The Growing Wave of Teenage Self-Injury"

(http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/featured_articles/20080506tuesday.html),

focusing on the following questions:

- a. What is self-injury?
- b. Why do adolescents engage in self-injuring or cutting behavior?
- c. Why is self-injuring often a secret or hidden problem?
- d. How has the Internet contributed to the rising trend of self-injury among adolescents?
- e. According to the article, what characteristics are typical of self-injurers?
- f. What treatment options are available for someone who is cutting him or herself?
- g. What are some warning signs that someone you know might be cutting?
- h. What are some different ways individuals might intentionally hurt themselves?

3. Explain to students that they will be further exploring issues related to coping with emotional stress through a "chalk talk" discussion activity. Explain that the goal of the activity is to share and explore ways of expressing emotions and coping with stressful situations. Remind students that self-injury is a serious behavior that can be very difficult to change, and may require therapeutic assistance. Encourage students to reflect on how they might identify negative strategies for coping with stress and employ more healthful strategies through shared discussion.

Begin by writing two or three of the following questions on different parts of the board, or in marker on poster paper posted in different parts of the room. Establish a "no names" rule before beginning, meaning that students should not write their name or the name of any other student on the board or poster papers. Although the activity is not completely anonymous, as students may observe each other writing their comments, it will help create some separation between students and their comments.

Have students write their responses to the questions and to each other's posts (also in chalk or marker) in the reserved space. In this manner, students engage in a written conversation, resulting in a web of responses.

After a designated period of time, during which there is no discussion aloud, only reading and writing and reflecting, read all of the responses aloud.

Depending on available space and time, the teacher may choose to add additional questions around the room, or discuss and replace the questions with a new group of two or three questions.

The following are possible questions for the "chalk talk" discussion:

- What are some situations that lead to emotional stress?
- What are different ways, both positive and negative, of dealing with stress brought on by strong or painful emotions and experiences?
- Where and how have you learned methods of dealing with emotional stress?
- How might someone avoid or stop engaging in destructive methods of dealing with stress? -Why do some people use self-injury and other unhealthy means to cope with stress and overwhelming emotions?
- Where can individuals find help and encouragement in order to deal with stressful situations in a constructive manner?
- How might you help a friend who is using a destructive behavior, like cutting, to cope with stress? What are some "do's" and "don'ts" to remember when trying to help someone who is under emotional pain?
- How does the phenomenon of self-injury relate to the broader spectrum of coping mechanisms we discussed as a class?

Before the end of class, hold a brief conversation about what students learned from the article and the activity. What is one new thing you can take away from class today?

4. WRAP-UP/HOMEWORK: Individually, students write short fictional dialogues between themselves and a "friend" who has been cutting or participating in another form of self-injury. Have students use information from the article and the discussion, as well as the list of advice on the "Family/Friend" page of the Web site [selfharm.net \(http://www.selfharm.net/injury.html\)](http://www.selfharm.net/injury.html) for reference.

Provide students with the following questions to reflect on as they organize and write their dialogue: "What might you say to your friend to help him or her? How do you think your friend would respond? How would you be sensitive to his or her feelings and emotions? What personal experiences might help you relate to your friend's feelings? What suggestions for coping with stress might you offer? Can you help

your friend resist the urge to cut, and if so, how? How would you present your ideas in a way that is helpful, not hurtful?"

Further Questions for Discussion:

- How can you help someone you know is engaging in self-injuring behaviors?
- What are some methods of stopping or coping with the urge to cut or self-injure?
- What are some common reactions by friends and family when they learn of an act of self-injury?
- In what ways is self-injuring similar to and different from other addictions?

Evaluation / Assessment:

Students will be evaluated based on participation in the initial exercise, thoughtful participation and discussion of the article, participation in a written discussion activity and creation of a thoughtful dialogue for homework.s

Vocabulary:

deliberately, spurious, self-injured, response, prompting, cutting, profile, sublethal, addictive, theorize, endorphins, self-regulate, overwhelming, dispel, hitched, community, manipulative, vulnerable, turmoil, persist, perpetuate, perceive, unstable, suppress, deal, harbinger, therapy, tolerate, stress, agents, urge

Extension Activities:

1. Research and write a report about one of the following emotional problems, which some but not all self-injurers may suffer from: depression, eating disorders, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder. What is the cause of the disorder you chose? What are the symptoms? How might it cause or result from self-injuring? What treatments, both pharmaceutical and therapeutic, are available for this disorder?

2. Read more about self-injuring by reading a book written on the topic, such as "Bodies under Siege: Self-Mutilation and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry" by Armando R. Favazza, "The Scarred Soul: Understanding & Ending Self-Inflicted Violence" by Tracy Alderman, or "A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain" by Marilee Strong. Then write a book review for a teen audience.

3. Explore further the role of the Internet in providing a space for and supporting "cutting communities" among teens. How are these purported support groups actually harmful? Then, create a Web site for teenagers that provides positive information and a supportive community designed to help them avoid destructive behaviors, including cutting.

4. Prepare a presentation about self-injurious behavior for a group of younger students. Make sure to include important facts about cutting, peer pressure and how to get help if they or someone they know is causing self-harm.

Interdisciplinary Connections:

Global History – Is self-injury a global phenomenon? How is it manifested differently in different cultures and countries? What are the historical roots of this behavior? Write a short essay on the history of self-injury.

Media Studies – How has self-injury been portrayed in the media? What impact have celebrities had on teens' attitudes toward cutting? Review an interview, TV or film clip or song that makes a statement about self-injury. Does it encourage or discourage the behavior? What feelings and emotions does it portray? Does it accurately reflect what researchers and psychologists know about the behavior and how?

Science – What is the body's physiologically response to self-injuring? What other activities cause a release of endorphins in the body? What are some positive ways to achieve a "natural high"? Might science provide a solution for individuals addicted to cutting? Make a How-It-Works poster diagramming the role of the brain in this addictive cycle.

Teaching with The Times - For the next month, clip articles related to teen mental health that appear in the New York Times. At the end of the month, review and discuss the articles as a class. To order The New York Times for your classroom, [click here](#).

Academic Content Standards:

MREL This lesson plan may be used to address the academic standards listed below. These standards are drawn from [Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education: 2nd Edition](#) and have been provided courtesy of the [Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning](#) in Aurora, Colorado.



In addition, this lesson plan may be used to address the academic standards of a specific state. Links are provided where available from each McREL standard to the [Achieve](#) website containing state standards for over 40 states. The state standards are from [Achieve's National Standards Clearinghouse](#) and have been provided courtesy of Achieve, Inc. in Cambridge Massachusetts and Washington, DC.

Grades 6-8

Health Standard 1- Knows the availability and effective use of health services, products, and information. Benchmarks: Knows how to locate and use community health information, products, and services that provide valid health information; Knows community health consumer organizations and the advocacy services they provide; Knows situations that require professional health services

Health Standard 2- Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health. Benchmarks: Knows cultural beliefs, socioeconomic considerations, and other environmental factors within a community that influence the health of its members; Understands how various messages from the media, technology, and other sources impact health practices; Understands how peer relationships affect health

Health Standard 4- Knows how to maintain mental and emotional health. Benchmarks: Knows strategies to manage stress and feelings caused by disappointment, separation, or loss (e.g., talking over problems with others, understanding that feelings of isolation and depression will pass, examining the situation leading to the feelings); Knows characteristics and conditions associated with positive self-esteem; Knows appropriate ways to build and maintain positive relationships with peers, parents, and other adults (e.g., interpersonal communication); Knows techniques for seeking help and support through appropriate resources

Behavioral Studies Standard 1- Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior. Benchmarks: Understands that each culture has distinctive patterns of behavior that are usually practiced by most of the people who grow up in it; Understands that usually within any society there is broad general agreement on what behavior is "unacceptable," but that the standards used to judge behavior vary for different settings and different subgroups and may change with time and in response to different political and economic conditions

Language Arts Standard 1- Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process. Benchmarks: Uses a variety of strategies to draft

and revise written work; Uses style and structure appropriate for specific audiences and purposes; Writes in response to literature

Grades 9-12

Health Standard 1- Knows the availability and effective use of health services, products, and information. Benchmarks: Knows how to determine whether various resources from home, school, and the community present valid health information, products, and services; Knows local, state, federal, and private agencies that protect and/or inform the consumer; Knows situations that require professional health services in the areas of prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation

Health Standard 2- Knows environmental and external factors that affect individual and community health. Benchmarks: Knows how the health of individuals can be influenced by the community; Understands how the prevention and control of health problems are influenced by research and medical advances; Knows how public health policies and government regulations impact health-related issues

Health Standard 4- Knows how to maintain mental and emotional health. Benchmarks: Knows skills used to communicate effectively with family, friends, and others, and the effects of open and honest communication; Knows strategies for coping with and overcoming feelings of rejection, social isolation, and other forms of stress; Understands the role of denial as a negative influence on mental and emotional health, and ways to overcome denial and seek assistance when needed

Behavioral Studies Standard 1- Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior. Benchmarks: Understands that cultural beliefs strongly influence the values and behavior of the people who grow up in the culture, often without their being fully aware of it, and that people have different responses to these influences; Understands that social distinctions are a part of every culture, but they take many different forms; Understands that heredity, culture, and personal experience interact in shaping human behavior, and that the relative importance of these influences is not clear in most circumstances; Understands that family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, institutional affiliations, socioeconomic status, and other group and cultural influences contribute to the shaping of a person's identity

Language Arts Standard 1- Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process. Benchmarks: Uses a variety of strategies to draft and revise written work; Writes compositions that are focused for different audiences; Writes compositions that fulfill different purposes; Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical, and observational narrative compositions; Writes in response to literature
