BOOK REVIEW

Women Living with Self-Injury

By Jane Wegscheider Hyman, Ph.D.
Reviewed by Faedra Lazar Weiss, M.A.H.L.

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Most people have purposely injured themselves at some time in their lives. Think of the irresistible impulse to run one’s tongue over a cold sore or slamming a fist into a wall in frustration or anger. Most people would feel relief when the sore healed or decide that skinning and bruising their knuckles once was enough. However, for some individuals, injuring themselves becomes a sort of addiction. They depend on repeated and often escalating self-injury to function relatively normally in the larger world.

Little research has been conducted on self-injury. In a culture in which most personal predilections and failings are discussed openly, people who self-injure often go to great lengths to hide their behavior and its consequences. Dr. Hyman brings us into the experiences of fifteen women willing to talk about “the last secret”—cutting/burning or battering their own bodies. All of the women included in this volume are European American, in their mid-20’s to early 50’s and work outside of the home. Several are also students. Some have children; some do not. Some are lesbian, some straight, and some cannot imagine voluntarily participating in any sexual relationship. The author presents their stories in their own words, some at length, others in shorter vignettes. Her analysis shows the common threads and also the uncommon ones.

One thread running through all fifteen stories is child abuse. Every woman telling her story lived through severe sexual and/or physical abuse perpetrated by one or more people she should have been able to trust above all others (almost always parents or other close relatives). A related thread is difficulty in expressing anger. Even in dreams and fantasies, these women rarely can imagine confronting their abusers, let alone harming them in return. Instead, they harm themselves.

Another common thread is secrecy. A few of the women have been able to reveal their physical and emotional scars to a few chosen people, but most fear repercussions at home or at work, and with good reason. Women with children do not want to frighten them or to inadvertently encourage their children to injure themselves. Some partners refuse to tolerate self-injury; others believe they should be able to change a partner’s behavior. The women who work as counselors or social workers agonize over whether to confront colleagues who make fun of “cutters” or who treat all self-injury as if it were an active suicide attempt. Women in other jobs fear that colleagues will be disgusted by their actions or will decide for them whether or not to intervene in a situation that invites self-injury.

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Women Living with Self-Injury is written in plain language and will be of use to many audiences. Women who self-injure, their families, friends, colleagues, and lay and professional counselors will find insights and resources. As Dr. Hyman properly notes, this book should be approached with caution: Readers may need to skip graphic descriptions of self-injury and child abuse or to limit the amount they read at a sitting. Women who have lived with these realities may reawaken painful memories or feel the need to injure themselves as they read the experiences of others. They may want to read this volume, if at all, with a trusted friend or counselor.

This book is not the last word on self-injury. The term “self-injury” itself is chosen from among inadequate alternatives. Dr. Hyman notes areas that deserve much more research: the stories of women of color, and men, who self-injure; the similarities, differences, and overlaps between self-injury and forms of body decoration such as tattooing, branding, piercing, and scarification; and religious traditions that support or encourage afflicting or injuring one’s body, as well as further research among European American women. One hopes to see some of these areas addressed in works of this caliber by Dr. Hyman or colleagues inspired by her research.

The author, Jane Wegscheider Hyman, Ph.D., is a researcher and writer on mental and physical health, specializing in mental health problems that primarily afflict women. Her other works include The Little Book and, with others, Sacrificing Ourselves for Love: Ourselves, Growing Older; and The New Our Bodies, Ourselves.

The reviewer, Faedra Lazar Weiss, M.A.H.L., is Research Associate at the Girls Incorporated National Resource Center. She is co-author of “Prevention of Sexual Intercourse for Teen Women Aged 12 to 14” (The Prevention Researcher, 1997, Vol. 4(1), pp. 10-12) and of numerous publications on issues affecting the lives of girls and young women. She is a member of the editorial board of The Prevention Researcher.