

A Biblical Approach to Understanding and Addressing Self-Harm

(Chad Wiles)

1. Defining Self-Harm

- Definition: Self-Harm or Self-Injury is the intentional physical harm caused to one's own body. ¹
- Statistics²
 - i. Research indicates that self-injury occurs in approximately 5% of adults in the United States. Rates are higher among adolescents, with approximately 17% of teens reporting some form of self-injury. Studies show an even higher risk for self-injury among college students, with rates ranging from 17-35%.
 - ii. People who self-injure commonly report they feel empty inside, over or under stimulated, unable to express their feelings, lonely, not understood by others, and/or fearful of intimate relationships and adult responsibilities. Self-injury is their way to cope with or relieve painful or hard-to-express feelings and is generally not a suicide attempt. The relief that self-injury brings is temporary, and destructive cycle often develops without proper treatment. Self-injury can also be a way for people to have control over their bodies when they have little or no control over other parts of their lives.
 - iii. **People may engage in self-injury to:**
 - 1. Distract themselves from negative feelings.
 - 2. Express emotions they might be embarrassed to show.
 - 3. Develop a sense of control over their lives.
 - 4. Process the way they are feeling.
 - 5. Punish themselves for things they think they have done wrong.

¹ Jones, Robert D., et al. *The Gospel for Disordered Lives: An Introduction to Christ-Centered Biblical Counseling*. (B&H Academic, 2021) 329.

² *Self Injury (Cutting, Self-Harm or Self-Mutilation)*. Mental Health America, 2025, <https://www.mhanational.org/conditions/self-injury-cutting-self-harm-or-self-mutilation>.

iv. Common Risk Factors (Jones)

1. Inability to cope with negative emotions (i.e., difficulty with emotional expression)
2. Prior exposure to self-harm behaviors
3. low levels of self-control or emotional regulation,
4. a lack of a strong support network
5. Having comorbid mental health struggles (anxiety or depression)

2. Heart Issues Behind Self-Harm

- Idols of the heart
 - i. The issue of self-harm is ultimately a worship issue
 - ii. Worship is defined (seek, serve, sacrifice, spend, speak (Matt. 12:34), and trust).
 1. When you are not forced to speak on something what do you talk about? That will measure your heart's desires.
 2. "An idol is anything that we consistently make equal to or more important than God in our attention, desire, devotion, and choices." (Stuart Scott)
 - a. All idols are objects of our lusts and thus assist us in worshiping ourselves for our own glory.
 - iii. The Heart is the temple of Worship (Ezk.14:1-12; Rom.1:18-25;1 Cor.6:19-20)
 - iv. The Heart is the fountain of behavior issues (Prv.4:23; Mk.7:21ff)
 - v. The Heart is where belief and unbelief take place (Rom 10:8-10)
- **Self-Harm is a manifestation of the idol of Control**
 - i. The idol of control promises ultimate happiness and contentment from achieving complete control. The problem is we are never entirely in control of anything. As we strive for certainty and are met with circumstances that are out of our control, we deal with the
 1. following emotions:
 - a. Fear & Dread:
 - i. Many of us struggle with the possibility of disaster happening in the future.
 - ii. Sometimes this comes from experience.
 1. Many of us have faced tragedy and loss. If you have been through hard times, then going through them again is the last thing you want to do.
 - iii. Sometimes this comes from real possibilities.
 1. Bad things can happen. Our fears have a little truth, but it is often exaggerated.
 2. We do not want to be vulnerable.

- iv. Anxiety:
 - 1. A feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.
- v. Depression
 - 1. Severe despondency and dejection are typically felt over a while and are accompanied by feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy.

3. Self-Harmers are False Priests (1 Kings 19)

- Half-truths of self-harmers
 - i. We are sinners and sin requires payment
 - 1. Lev. 17:11, Heb. 9:11-18, Lev. 16
 - 2. Like the Prophets of Baal, Self-Harmers are trying to manipulate and appease a God of their own creation
 - 3. Levitical priests bathed themselves in blood & self-injurers attempt to right the wrongs they perceive, feel, & experience through their own means of atonement called coping mechanisms by the world's system. (Mark Shaw)

4. Hope for Self-Harmers in Christ

- Christ is the true High Priest (Heb. 10:1-18)
 - i. Hope is found in the power of the indestructible life of Jesus Christ who initiates a new covenant for those whose faith is in Him.
 - ii. Jesus is a priest in the likeness of Melchizedek not based upon the legal requirement concerning bodily descent since He was from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. (Heb. 7)
 - iii. Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness" and he is king of Salem which means "peace." (Gen. 14:18-21; Ps. 110:4)
- **Repentance and Faith are required for true peace** (Rom. 1:18-25; 3:10-18; 8:1; Eph. 2:1-3; Titus 3:3 (Adapted from Dr. Stuart Scott)
 - i. Exchanging God's truth for lies (Rom. 1:25)
 - 1. Believing pain brings relief/peace
 - 2. Seeing body as enemy rather than temple (1 Cor. 6:19-20; Ps. 139:13-14)
 - 3. Trusting in self-punishment over Christ's atonement (Heb. 10:10-14; Col. 2:23)
 - 4. Living in slavery to self-destruction (Rom. 6:16, John 8:34, 2 Pet. 2:19)

5. Seeking control through false worship (Jer. 2:13, Rom. 1:21-23)
- ii. Sin Problem: Self-atonement and self-worship
 1. Attempting to pay for guilt/shame (Heb. 10:1-4, Isa. 64:6)
 2. Making suffering an idol (Col. 3:5)
 3. Rejecting Christ's sufficient sacrifice (Gal. 2:21)
- iii. Gospel Solution: Christ's Complete Work
 1. His wounds fully heal (Isaiah 53:5, 1 Pet. 2:24)
 2. His blood cleanses all shame (1 John 1:7-9, Heb. 9:14)
 3. His righteousness covers completely (2 Cor. 5:21, Rom. 8:1)

5. Practical Application

- Renewing the Mind
 - i. (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23; Phil. 4:8)
 - ii. Truth vs. lies (John 8:32; 2 Cor. 10:5)
 - iii. Promises (2 Pet. 1:4; 2 Cor. 1:20)
 - iv. Christ's sufficiency (Col. 2:9-10; 2 Pet. 1:3)
- New Response Patterns
 - i. Crying out (Ps. 34:17; 1 Pet. 5:7)
 - ii. Word focus (Ps. 119:11; Josh. 1:8)
 - iii. Community (Heb. 10:24-25; Gal. 6:2)
 1. Worship (Col. 3:16; Ps. 95:1-2)
 2. Accountability (Prov. 27:17; James 5:16)
 3. Disciplines (1 Tim. 4:7-8; Phil. 2:12-13)