Consultation Project with Churches for Adolescents who Self-Injure

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Definition of Self Injury Behavior (SIB)

SIB is an attempt to ameliorate emotional pain or to manage affect. Behavioral symptoms include cutting, burning, stabbing, excessive tattooing and piercing (Derouin, A. & Bravenda, T., 2004; Whitlock, J., Powers, J. & Eckenrode, J., 2006). Though not the intention, suicide is sometimes the result (Silverman, M., 2007).

Developmental Issues of Adolescents and Teens

Adolescence is marked by increased feelings of distress due to developmental challenges. These challenges create a need to find more ways to cope with stress independent of one’s parents [(Arnett, 1999; Compas, 1987; Petersen, Kennedy & Sullivan, 1991) Whitlock, et al.]. Life stage stressors include establishing caring, meaningful relationships, finding acceptance and belonging in social groups, and the establishment of interpersonal intimacy: Eriksonian developmental stage for adolescents: (identity vs. role confusion); increased decision making responsibility, development/confirmation of sexual/gender identity, increasing self-responsibility, individuation push for independence from parents, developing ability to love, and a desire to work (Berg, 2005; Erikson). Freudian psychosexual genital stage includes puberty with sexual interest in the opposite sex. It is also marked by experimenting with post-latency sexual pleasure through the genitals (Freud). When these developmental stressors become overwhelming, teenagers seek alternative coping skills. One of these coping mechanisms for teenagers is SIB.

How to Identify at Risk Teenagers

Teenagers who are at a higher risk for SIB are as follows: 1) females, 2) those who have experienced sexual abuse or trauma, 3) those with eating disorders, personality disorders and/or 4) teenagers who have friends who self injure.

Psycho-educational Presentations with the Clergy, Youth Group Leaders, and Youth Group
With the clergy, the consultant will present on the nature and function of SIB and the biopsychosocial and spiritual dynamics involved. With the youth group leadership, the consultant will include the aforementioned presentation and he/she will also discuss how to meaningfully engage adolescents who may be injuring themselves. After the youth group leadership has received their training, they will address the issue with their youth group.

**Church SIB Protocol:** Create protocols for how to handle teens engaging in SIB

- **Create a Plan for Prevention:** such as Student Waiver Form, First Aid Training and delegating a point of contact (POC) for handling reports and follow-up.

- **Create Protocols for Specific Situations:** delineate specific steps of how to react and who to contact to effectively deal with suspicions, active engagement on-site, and youth group participation following reports.

**Christian Integration**

What is the church to do? SIB believers have a responsibility (Eph. 4, Romans 12:2, James 5:16). The church has a responsibility to treat the individual with gentleness and compassion through God’s guidance (Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12, 1 Thes. 2:7, 1 Peter 3:8, Eph. 4:32). For the unbeliever demonstrating SIB, the church needs to reach out in love, help the person move towards healing and spiritual reconciliation, and witness if given the chance (Mark 12:28-31, 1 Peter 2:24, John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Eph. 2:8-9, Romans 5:6-11). Watts (2000) gives us seven points for Christian response to self-injurers whose suffering is ignored or misunderstood:

1. **Eyes of Understanding** – witness to suffering and counter invisibility
2. **Ears that can hear** – listen as a way to move silence into speech
3. **A need for remembering** – walk alongside to remember the pain
4. **A need for Christian story telling** – learn to love and co-create a new story
5. **Liturgy, ritual, and sacrament** – suggest expressiveness through the body of Christ
6. **Develop other ways of binding** – teach centering prayer
7. A need to counter isolation through a caring network – develop a support system

**Referral List**

The consulting church will be provided with an extensive contact list for local mental health agencies, private counselors, hospitals, the police department, and psychiatrists.
References


Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages Summary Chart. Retrieved April 4, 2009, from


