Cornell Research Program on
Self-Injury and Recovery

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What is the link?
## The Relationship Between Non-Suicidal Self-Injury and Social Media

For adolescents who engage in self-injury, social media can be a significant part of life. The following factsheet explores what we know (and don't know!) about social media and its effect on self-injury behaviors.

Who is this for?

Anyone interested in learning more about non-suicidal self-injury (also simply referred to here as "self-injury") and social media interactions.

What is included?

Information on social media and its different effects on non-suicidal self-injury behavior.

Suggestions for assessment and response when an individual's self-injury is worsened by their use of social media.

Why self-injury and social media?

Using social media and forming online connections particularly appeals to adolescents who experience feelings of isolation, a feeling common among individuals who self-injure. They may be hesitant or unwilling to discuss self-injury with the people in their physical lives, be it parents, siblings, teachers, or friends. Many youth (and adults) who self-injure turn to the Internet with the expectation that anonymous social media interactions will help them form meaningful relationships with others who can relate to their experience[1].

Self-injury and social media usage are both significant aspects of the modern adolescent's life. Adolescents engage in online activities more than any other age group. A 2015 study conducted by the Pew Research Center reports that 92% of teenagers go online daily, and a total of 24% admit going online "almost constantly." Social media is the most common online activity adolescents engage in, with 71% of adolescents regularly using more than one social media platform[2]. Since a large number of adolescents also self-injure (an estimated 14 to 21%), it is not surprising that there are many social media forums in which self-injury is a topic or *the only* topic of conversation and exchange[3].

In addition to the role the Internet and other forms of social media may be playing in the lives of youth who self-injure, it is important to note that self-injury in an increasingly common staple in print and visual media as well. Prior to the 1980's, references to self-injury in media were rare. When it was shown, self-injury was largely depicted as part of other serious mental illnesses. Now, references to self-injury in movies, songs, and books are not only common but are depicted as a relatively normal part of growing up in modern times[4]. While the normalization of self-injury in the media may help those who engage in the behavior feel less isolated, it may also increase interest in trying or adopting the practice as a way of coping with stress or distress.
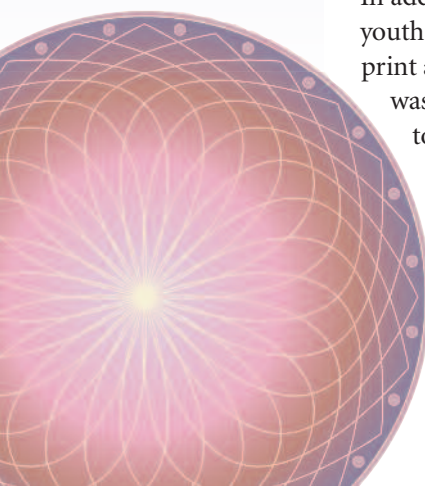
Self-injury contagion and social media:

Social contagion is considered to be in effect when two or more people who are part of the same group engage in self-injury within 24 hours of each other . Research does support the idea that contagion is likely to occur when adolescents observe their peers successfully using self-injury to cope. Media enhances the likelihood of social contagion by providing opportunities to connect with others who share the same behavior or the same stories and reasons for the behavior, or through social modeling which is present in movies, books, news stories or song lyrics.

Where do people go?

There are a variety of social media sites commonly used by those who engage in self-injury behaviors. While some may prefer to watch videos on sites like YouTube, others may resort to online message boards like Tumblr. These videos posted tend to be graphic, and one of the main concerns regarding self-injury videos posted on YouTube is that the videos are often uploaded without warnings and therefore are readily accessible to those who self-injure.

Videos, images and sound are powerful, often more powerful than words. Images, in particular, enhance the likelihood that emotion-laden memories are stored and recalled. If imagery and/or accompanying sounds evoke emotions in the viewers and these emotions validate the viewer's experience, they are likely to be positively stored and associated in long term memory. In cases where the content viewed is related to self-injury and the viewer is an individual who self-injures, the content presentation may inadvertently increase the likelihood of self-injury.

Social media and self-injury – what to watch for

Self-injury related content is very common across many different types of websites, especially social media platforms. Research has shown that exposure to this kind of content online could negatively influence adolescents who are recovering from self-injury, making it more likely for them to return to, or increase self-injury behaviors1. Several of these potential negative effects are outlined below:

- Social media communities in which members share their own self-injury experiences have been shown to reinforce or "trigger" self-injury behaviors.
- While the exchange of information is not inherently bad, when it is a discussion that encourages unhealthy

behaviors it can have a negative impact on an individual's recovery from that behavior. This type of harmful information can range from finding and learning new methods of self-injury to tips on hiding it. The following is an actual example of how social media can be harmful in this way:

Poster: *Has anyone found anything that helps to conceal them <self-injury scars>? I have a lot of them on my arms, and will have to wear a short sleeved top in a couple of days... I normally just wear long sleeves all the time, so I never have really thought about it. But it's becoming hotter outside and was wondering if there was a way to put something on them to at least fade them a little.*

Responder: *I usually wear my "granny" sweater around the house. I don't know if you've checked it out yet, but Mederma is actually really good stuff. Someone posted a rad method of lightening scars, I'll see if I can find it, then I'll bump it up. I used Mederma for almost a year, and that's how I passed my Army physicals (I bucked the system, har har). The hard part of using Mederma is remembering to use it consistently, plus it's pretty pricey- but worth it.*

Much of the negative effects of online self-injury content is driven by its presentation. If the content does not communicate the importance of recovery or if it explicitly discourages recovery, portrays self-injury as an effective and acceptable way of coping and a routine part of life (normalization), or as something aesthetically beautiful (glamorization), then it may encourage behavior rather than support the individual in addressing the root of the behavior. Often, glamorization comes from the music and pictures in videos, which are sometimes appealing to viewers.

Self-injury focused websites may be especially harmful to viewers with no or limited experience with self-injury, as they show how it can be used as a coping mechanism, especially in a stressful situation.

The fact that self-injury information online is normally of poor quality further contributes to its negative consequences. As a result, viewers may choose to forgo seeking help, may not see recovery as a feasible option, and may even feel more stigmatized and less likely to reach out for help. In general, social media that minimizes the effects, glamorizes, or normalizes self-injury can be harmful to an individual's recovery process.
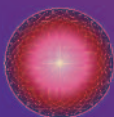
Is all social media harmful?

In general, most individuals who self-injure and who seek on-line communities report feeling like these communities help them move toward stopping self-injury and encourage more self-acceptance[1]. Typically only a minority report that online interaction worsens their self-injury. The nature of these positive effects of social media on self-injury are discussed below. The benefits of social media are often identified as:

- Increased sense of social/peer support found in online communities of individuals with similar experiences. This is true especially for those who would rather not talk about their self-injury offline. In this sense, social media platforms can act as a safe space to share experiences.
- Certain communication may actually act as a type of therapy, motivating introspection, and realization of why an individual self-injures and the best way to address it.
- Reduced social stigma as a result of greater awareness and willingness to share; this increases the likelihood that someone engaging in self-injury will seek treatment.
- In online communities moderated by mental health professionals, the trained therapist can ensure that discussions are useful and supportive. Moreover, conversations around self-injury may prompt moderators to learn more about the behavior and come up with innovative ideas about how best to support individual struggling with self-injury in virtual forums.

Some people will respond to comments on message boards with inspirational sayings in order to encourage those who self-injure to refrain from carrying out the behavior. The following is an example of a helpful response on a self-injury message board:

We are born in one day, we die in one day, we can change in one day, Anything can happen in just one day. I believe you will be alright, just take one day at a time.

In general, social media that allow for those who self-injure to bond over their experiences, console each other over relapses, and help each other back on the path towards recovery are seen as helpful.

Policy Guidelines

Many websites have instituted guidelines, in which they explicitly state that either self-injury cannot be mentioned or can be mentioned but not glorified on their site. These websites range from video sharing sites, to message board sites, photo sharing sites and general social media sites.

- YouTube, a video sharing site, does not explicitly say self-injury, but does include a section that says that no content that is harmful, dangerous or could cause people to get badly hurt is permitted.
- Tumblr, a message board site, has a section posted online stating that their site is not to be used for the "promotion or glorification of self-harm." More specifically, no content that encourages others to injure themselves will be permitted.
- Instagram's policy guidelines do not allow for any content that glorifies self-injury to be posted. The photo-sharing application states that any pictures that support self-injury will be taken down and accounts will be disabled.
- In Twitter's policy guidelines, the site explicitly mentions self-harm and warns viewers that they may come across a user who is considering suicide or engaging in self-injurious behaviors. The website will reach out to the user upon hearing about a person who is considering injuring himself or herself.
- Surprisingly, Facebook, an extremely popular social media site, does not even mention self-injury in their policy guidelines. The only related criteria listed are that no hate speech, threatening or pornographic content or information that encourages violence can be posted.

Even though many websites include information stating that they do not allow for self-injury content to be posted, individuals have found many loopholes and messages with harmful content are often shared on these platforms.

How to Help

Social media and other virtual forums are a growing part of daily life for all people. They will continue to be used as a resource by youth and adults who want community, a sense of belonging, and to feel heard, supported and helped. Helping people find social media outlets that enhance the likelihood of feeling uplifted and more likely to engage in recovery activities is the best way to help assure that social media is an ally in the recovery process. To this end, experts in this area (see http://sioutreach.org/) recommend that anyone in the position to monitor
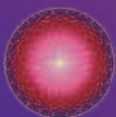
and/or influence on-line behavior of individuals who self-injure should be aware of the following considerations:

- Know the specific social media platforms and online communities that are being used, and assess as to where the content falls: are they helping or hindering the recovery process?
- Assess total time devoted to social media and online activities: a lot of time spent in on-line forums is likely to interfere with recovery;
- If there is an obvious need to change social media habits and the content being accessed, simply prohibiting its usage is usually ineffective. Instead of banning sites, directing youth towards healthier and more beneficial avenues of self-injury expression over social media is a more effective strategy to help.
- Focus on enhancing "internet literacy" skills. Media education should start at home with parents educating their children about recognizing media messages and questioning the underlying ideas and beliefs expressed. Our fact sheet focusing specifically on self-injury in the media contains more info on things to consider when talking to children about internet use. You can find it here:

http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/self-injury-in-the-media.pdf

Other great websites that are affiliated with credible health organizations and continuously monitored by experienced mental health professionals include:

- http://sioutreach.org/
- http://exchanges.webmd.com/self-harm-exchange
- http://www.lifesigns.org.uk
- http://www.bpdworld.org/Self-Harm/

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