

Press Articles on Self injury

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The Mirror

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SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 20

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HEADLINE: CRY FOR HELP..;
60,000 PEOPLE SELF-HARM .. AND KIDS OF 7 AT RISK TOO 11,000 PATIENTS TREATED
FOR DELIBERATE MUTILATION 431 OF OUR SOCIETY'S MOST VULNERABLE COMMIT
SUICIDE

BYLINE: BY LYNN JOLLY

BODY:

TROUBLED children as young as seven are regularly cutting and slashing themselves as a cry for help, it emerged yesterday.

Up to 60,000 Irish people self-harm every year by mutilating their body or burning their flesh with lit cigarettes.

In 2005, 431 people took their own lives - 35 more than the number of people killed in road accidents.

Ireland's booze culture, drug-taking and the reluctance to talk about problems are some of the reasons behind suicide and self-harm.

While 11,000 patients are treated in hospitals across the country for **self-injury**, there are another 49,000 who do not ask for help.

Pieta House, a centre to help stop our spiralling self-harm and suicide rates was officially opened in Lucan, Co Dublin, yesterday.

Its chief executive Joan Freeman said: "Suicide and self-harm rates are increasing in Ireland.

"Self-harm is more common among young people and it is a survival mechanism. These people do not want to die. They might injure themselves by cutting and banging their heads, and they start at a young age - as young as seven. It seems to affect girls more and the average age is 13 or 14. Self-harm is a release of emotions, whether it is anger or sadness."

The privately-funded charity, which offers free therapy to people, was officially opened by Health Minister Mary Harney.

Pieta House been working for a year to support existing psychiatric and acute hospital services.

There are also 12 psychotherapists on hand to help people in crisis.

Dr John Connolly, secretary of the Irish Association of Suicidology and director of Pieta House, said: "Although services for persons who are at risk have improved in recent years, there are still enormous gaps in what needs to be provided."

There was outrage last year during the coroner's inquest into the death of suicide mum Sharon Grace, 29, from Wexford.

Sharon drowned herself and her two little girls three-year-old Abby and Mikahla, four, after she could not get a social worker to talk to.

She was told by the Ely Private Hospital near her home to come back during office hours.

Sharon's angry dad Eddie Reddy said authorities "should be ashamed of themselves" because 17 months later there were still no emergency contact numbers available.

Since the 1960s Ireland's suicide rate has increased alarmingly.

In 1980, 216 people took their own lives and by 2001 there was an all-time high of 519 suicides.

Self-harm is also on the up, with 11,000 cases of parasuicide recorded.

Health experts believe the hidden scale of the problem could be as high as 60,000 cases annually.

Ms Freeman added: "More services like ours are needed because we see the person as often as possible with the same therapist.

"For anyone suffering from self-harm talking is the best thing along with things like walking, writing in a journal or playing an instrument."

IF you need an appointment at Pieta House call 01 6010000. Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer should also ring this number or email mary@pieta.ie.

Irish Mirror Comment: Page 8

news@irishmirror.ie

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The Daily Telegraph (LONDON)

May 1, 2006 Monday

SECTION: FEATURES; Health; Pg. 21

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HEADLINE: 'I don't want to cut myself any more' Should nurses and hospitals be more understanding towards 'self-harmers'? Lisa Reich, who started hurting herself at 14 with a pin, before moving on to shards of glass, thinks they should

BYLINE: Lisa Reich

BODY:

Charlene Thomas stopped me in the corridor outside the art class and told me I smelt of vomit, which, in her defence I probably did. At 14, I was already a veteran bulimic. She said she was going to call me "Pukey" and that she wasn't going to sit next to me ever again. She said I was a fat bitch who smelt of horses, too (horses were my passion, a salve to the horrors of school).

Instead of feeling anger, and telling her that at least I wasn't a bully who reeked of cigarettes, I recoiled from her. Deep inside I felt a self-loathing so strong it was like a jolt of electricity - a visceral punch, the force of which knocked me off my feet, literally.

"Ew! I can see your knickers," laughed Charlene as I landed, legs splayed. And off she skipped, to tell the class about Pukey, the girl who fell over when you were mean to her, and smelt of horses to boot.

As I clambered to my feet, I saw a drawing pin embedded in the soft flesh of my palm. It had dropped from the notice board outside the art room and I'd landed on it when I fell.

I studied the pin. Then, instead of taking it out, I pushed it in a bit deeper. Then I dragged it up to my wrist, and pushed harder, making a deep scratch. It hurt, and yet... it didn't. And then I saw the little bubbles of crimson pop up, and as I dragged the pin deeper still, the bubbles turned into a little stream, and the blood began to trickle.

It was a "Eureka" moment. Finally, I was able to let out the big scream that had been held inside me, the scream that mere sulks or throwing up my food couldn't ever convey.

Suffice to say, I was not a happy child. I didn't fit in, I couldn't fit in. In my head, horses and dogs liked me, other children didn't. I was plump and unwieldy, I ate too much, and when other children told me how horrible I was, it never crossed my mind to disbelieve them. My first, self-inflicted, bloody scratch somehow made all the bad stuff disappear.

I carried that drawing pin everywhere and yelled at my mother when she stealth-washed my jeans with the pin inside the pocket. Luckily, it had lodged in the seam, so I managed to pass off my near-violent tantrum (I had wanted to hit her) as annoyance that a "vitaly important" phone number was lost.

I stood over the machine for the entire cycle, and when I found that the pin was safe, my relief was so enormous that I hugged my mother, which astonished her, apologised, which astonished her even more, then ran up to my room, locked the door, and had a celebratory scratch.

My panic over losing the pin, together with the fear of someone discovering why, had created a storm inside me and it had to be assuaged. By that stage just scratching didn't really do it for me, so I'd push the pin in a little deeper every time. But never too deep, and never anywhere obvious. I was careful. I knew which arteries and veins to avoid.

Self-harming was great (though I never thought of it as "harming"). It was good for me. It made me stop throwing up so much. I didn't need bulimia any more. Bulimia was so yesterday. And this was better for my teeth.

My parents said I looked much happier. One morning, with a girls-together smile, my mother asked: "Is there something you want to tell me?", probably hoping that I'd finally found a boyfriend. I mirrored her smile, wiggled my eyebrows in a "could be, could be" fashion and let her think the best.

The problem with self-harming is that your canvas quickly becomes cluttered. The constant scratching creates scars and marks, and these are what eventually gave me away.

I had kept my secret with a long-sleeves-no-matter-what policy for an entire summer, cursing the heat wave. I told everyone I was terrified of getting skin cancer. And then I came down for breakfast one day, and knew my secret was out.

My parents had suspected something. There had been a nocturnal parental visitation, the covers carefully pulled down to reveal the lace-like scratch scars over my body. Everything sharp disappeared from the house; I was told off by my GP; scolded by the nurse as, rather brutally, she administered a tetanus booster.

I said: 'It was only a pin, for God's sake - how much damage could I do!' - a statement that was greeted with horror by everyone. And so I became a more secretive and creative self-harmer - but less careful.

The pin had been confiscated, but I needed something harder anyway. Bits of glass found on the street, sharp rocks, anything with a hard edge. I'd smirk when my mother spotted a new scar, feeling only fleeting guilt at the second-party pain I was causing.

At 16, I got blood poisoning after using a sliver of glass. My arm swelled like a balloon and I nearly died. I hadn't wanted to die, of course, though the A&E nurses refused to believe me. To them, my self-harm was clearly building up to a suicide attempt. A theory that had me rolling my eyes, wondering how they could get it so wrong. I tried to explain it was fine, that it was my way of coping with feelings, but they didn't understand.

It went on for years. Then, a week before my 18th birthday, I made a cut with a bit of glass I'd found in the park. It was too deep. It revealed the flesh beneath, the fat, the tissue, the ugliness, all of it. I showed my mother the wound, and told her I wanted to stop. I can't say exactly why I chose that moment to stop. Much in the same way as I couldn't say exactly why I started. But a door had closed. I had only ever found comfort in blood - the damaged flesh made me feel fearfully mortal.

I saw a therapist for two years, and she helped me to find a voice that wasn't blood. And, while I still look at knives in a different way to "normal" people, I've pretty much managed to abstain for a decade.

OK, so I've fallen off the wagon a few times - but never deliberately. I still have my moments - best depicted by Munch's "The Scream" - and I'm even mildly nostalgic for the release I know that self-harm will give. But I manage to control it because I've learnt another language. I've learnt to articulate my feelings - and I've learnt a lot about self-harm.

I am a self harmer in the same way that an alcoholic will always be an alcoholic. From my experience, self-harm is misunderstood. It is greeted by raised eyebrows and mild disgust. It's seen, quite simply, as a bad thing.

Well, it isn't. It is a language that some people need in order to cope with their lives. Stopping people, telling them it is wrong, forces their hand, and that hand becomes more frantic, less careful.

At the Royal College of Nursing Congress last week, it was suggested that health-care workers should help people who repeatedly do harm to themselves to do so safely.

Chris Holley, a consultant nurse, who is involved in a pilot study at a hospital in Staffordshire that offers advice on how to self-harm safely, says that self-harmers have "a therapeutic need for **self-injury**. They should be supported, not chastised and made to feel as if they are hiding some sort of dirty affliction.

"It's not about handing out cutting implements to patients," Holley said. "It's about helping people who use self-harm to manage their feelings." According to Holley, for some self-harmers the cutting is a "safe coping strategy", which reduces suicidal thoughts. And, while the long-term goal is always to help people find "a better way of coping", it often does more harm to confiscate their "tools", and try to prevent them from harming themselves.

"When **self-injury** is inevitable, we need to support patients, not judge and criticise them," Holley said. "Hoping someone won't do it won't work. We need to discover the reason behind **self-injury**, what cutting means to those who do it, and explore alternatives to the self-harm."

However, the dilemma for nurses is clear, and it is understandable why many feel that such an approach is a breach of their duty of care.

Tania Dickinson, chairman of the National Self-Harm Network charity, supports Holley's views, and "any kind of shift in the NHS's perspective that looks more understandingly upon self-harm".

She is right. Looking back, I believe that what pushed me towards dangerous edges, mentally and physically, was not self-harming per se, but the treatment from some of the nurses who tended my wounds.

They made me feel like a nuisance, a nutter, an attention-seeking brat. Now, though, I can appreciate that this was probably motivated by fear, disbelief and a concern that, if they did lend me a sympathetic ear, I may have taken it to mean: "Go ahead! Cut! We're not stopping you!"

I hope that Holley's enlightened approach to a much misunderstood agony is embraced. Half a million people will be very grateful for it.

National Self-Harm Network, www.nhsn.co.uk

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SECTION: GUARDIAN FEATURES PAGES; Pg. 24

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HEADLINE: G2: Health: 'I keep cutting till I feel better': One in five girls aged between 15 and 17 has deliberately hurt themselves, according to new research. Paul Lewis asks one self-harmer why she does it

BYLINE: Paul Lewis

BODY:

Apart from the dark verses of introspection written on her walls, there appears to be nothing in Nia Could's bedroom to indicate an addiction she has had since she was 12. Then she peels back her duvet to uncover a black leather journal and a packet of plasters. "It's the perfect hiding place," she says, delicately tapping the side of her diary until six razor blades fall into her hand.

Next, from beneath a messy pile of laundry next to her bed, she pulls a large blood-soaked

towel. "I don't wash it as often as I should," she admits, before hurriedly packing away her cutting paraphernalia. "I'm not really one for caring for my wounds."

Along with two other girls, 14-year-old Nia, who lives with her father and brother at their home in Charford, near Birmingham, is the subject of a Channel 4 documentary, *The Cutting Club*, which exposes the world of self-harm from the perspective of the young, usually female, victims.

Nia is an exceptionally intelligent girl, and she knows her self-harming is a problem. "I do want to stop. It's not a healthy thing, it's not normal. Whatever normal is, it's not that."

But she isn't as abnormal as she might think. Self harm is now recognised by mental health professionals as an addiction and last year, a survey published by The Priory Group found that 20% of girls aged between 15 and 17 have deliberately hurt themselves. The survey also found that more than a million British adolescents, including boys, have at some point considered harming themselves. Experts say that a small minority of these teenagers will continue self-harming into adulthood.

The first time Nia cut herself was two weeks before her 13th birthday. "I'd been given a pen-knife by my uncle for Christmas. I was messing around with it in my room, cutting up bits of paper. It must have just made sense; I was stressed and I wanted to take it out on myself."

There are a number of problems that could explain Nia's cutting. Top of the list, she admits, is her lack of self-esteem. "As long as I can remember I've disliked myself," she explains. "I've never exactly detested myself, but I can't remember ever being comfortable in my own skin." Then there is school: a place where she was constantly bullied. Nia's depressions have led her to overdosing four times and spending eight weeks at an adolescent unit.

But her father, Pete, a mental health nurse, believes there is another reason his daughter turned to self-harm. Several months before she first cut, Nia's mother, Denise, died of cancer.

"With her mum passing away she lost her best friend and someone to talk to," says Pete. "We tried to find counselling, but there was a waiting list. So there was no one there for her to relate to."

But whatever the initial cause, Nia's addiction persists. She now injures herself about twice a week. This is an improvement: a year ago it was daily, sometimes in the school toilets. Her arms are criss-crossed with a patchwork of healing scars.

When her father discovered she was injuring herself, he was devastated. "You know what's happening but you're just a spectator. I looked at my beautiful daughter and thought how can she mutilate herself like that? But there's nothing I can do to stop her. At its worst, it was like when my wife was dying: my input was simply to be there and witness it." Now Pete has learned to live with - although not accept - what his daughter calls her "coping

mechanism". Some parents go further. In the documentary one girl, Abigail, tearfully cries "I need my scars" after her father removes cutting equipment from her room. The next day her mother gives in and supplies her with a razor.

Nia doesn't blame her father for struggling to understand why she cuts. "Emotions don't just disappear," she says. "There's always got to be something that makes them go away. Some people go out for a walk. I just think: why walk when I can cut?"

"Occasionally I do it out of anger. I think: I deserve to hurt. Other times I just feel overwhelmed and need to restore some sense of normality within myself. Hurting, you see, it's normal; it's normal to feel pain. It hurts," she admits. "I won't lie and say it doesn't. But at the same time you're expecting the pain, so there's no shock."

It's no coincidence that Nia's rationalisations are well-formed; she is used to discussing **self-injury**. Along with 20,000 others, she belongs to an online community who use the controversial website RecoverYourLife.com (known among users as RYL) to seek information and solidarity from fellow self-harmers. She logs on to RYL for up to five hours a day.

The site was developed by Harley Morlsworth, a 24-year-old web designer from Suffolk, originally under the name "Ruin Your Life". "It was initially a forum for the intellectual discussion of the art of self-destruction," he says, somewhat blithely.

The truth is more sinister: under its previous title, the website contained graphic photographs of **self-injury**, postings known as "triggers" that would prompt users to injure themselves. For Nia, then aged 12, the website provided a lens through which to comprehend what she had tentatively started with her uncle's pen-knife.

Morlsworth recently renovated the site to offer advice and support to users, and improved mechanisms for moderating the content. From 1,000 hits a week at its inception, RYL now receives more than 1 million a week - although he denies that the huge audience visiting RYL are ever encouraged to self-harm. "Nowhere on the site do we say self-harm is a good thing," he says.

Indeed, Morlsworth now says he's an expert on self-harm, claiming to have read every medical journal on the subject, and hopes to register RYL as a charity. "I have become dedicated to a community that continues to amaze me," he says. "They need a central person to direct things."

But Dr Andrew McCulloch, chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, which will publish a national inquiry into self-harm next month, is worried about sites such as RYL, which he says can serve to normalise the problem. "These sites can do more harm than good," he warns. "Warnings that postings might induce self-harm are clearly inadequate."

Nia accepts the risks, but continues to see RYL as a source of support and friendship; an open space where people will understand her. "On the internet there's always someone there," she explains. "It's better than the outside world" *

The Cutting Club is on Channel 4 on Tuesday February 21 at 10am.

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