

The Cycle of Self-Injury

Point A: Mental anguish

The individual may be plagued by intrusive or unacceptable thoughts, images, flashbacks, nightmares, "body memories" (somatic sensations) of traumatic events, or burdened by negative self-beliefs, for example, "I'm bad, evil, worthless, a waste of space, everything is my fault, I don't deserve..." Trapped inside, the mental anguish begins to cause internal chaos. **A "fire" starts smoldering.**

Point F: The grief reaction

The reality of the individual's actions starts to sink in. Shame, guilt, self-disgust or self-hate may rekindle the smoldering embers. Because the underlying issues (the internal chaos) remain locked up inside and unresolved, the cycle continues unless change is effected at Point A.

Point E: Feel better/different

With the raging inferno under control, the individual temporarily experiences:

- Relief from tension, anxiety, and post-up emotions such as fear, anger, or frustration
- A feeling of euphoria, numbness or detachment (dissociation)
- A sense of feeling more alive, more real, more grounded in reality – or, if the function was self-punishment – a degree of satisfaction.

Generally, the individual feels calmer, more in control, "comfortably numb", and can think more clearly. In other words, self-injury appears to reduce the individual's level of emotional and physiological arousal to a tolerable level, and the internal chaos is temporarily soothed. Thus, the physical injuries may seem a small price to pay to escape from the "raging inferno inside". Furthermore, following an episode of self-injury, some individuals report sleeping soundly – this is a rare occurrence for many.

Point B: Emotional engulfment

The smoldering fire sparks powerful feelings and emotions, which trigger off "a raging inferno inside". These powerful feelings and emotions also remain trapped inside. The individual starts to feel frightened, desperate, about to explode, or dissociated ("unconsciously numb" feels nothing).

Point C: Panic stations

The raging inferno gathers momentum. The individual feels out of control, or too numb (detached, distant, disconnected), and experiences a compelling urge to self-injure.

Point D: Action stations

The individual self-injures, which extinguishes the raging inferno inside, or alleviates the feelings of desperation.

The act may be carried out in a state of:

- Awareness (the individual feels the pain)
- Partial awareness (the individual feels some pain)
- Non-awareness (the individual feels minimal or no pain [a dissociative state])

The act may be motivated by:

- A need to release tension or anxiety
- A need to communicate acute emotional distress (to self/other/s)
- A need to feel pain (self-punish)
- A need to escape from emotional pain (enter a dissociated state)
- A need to end a dissociated state (feeling disconnected from oneself, feeling numb, empty, or dead inside; or experiencing oneself or one's surroundings as unreal)
- A need to exert a sense of control over one's body
- A need to ward off suicidal thoughts.

Note: This list is, by no means exhaustive.