

Treating self-injurious behaviors in traumatized adolescents

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Types of self-injury

- Cutting torso or extremities
- Burning
- Self-stabbing or piercing
- Self-biting or chewing
- Picking at wounds or scabs
- Head banging
- Punching or hitting oneself
- More extreme behaviors

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Etiology

- Early trauma, child abuse, child neglect, and/or attachment disturbance
- Imbalance between:
 - Triggerable attachment/trauma-related distress
 - Anger, anxiety, self-hatred
 - Inadequate affect regulation

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Functions

- Distress Reduction Behaviors (DRBs)
- Functions include
 - Distraction from emotional pain
 - Externalization/displacement
 - Communication of distress
 - Proximity-seeking
 - Relief from dissociation/numbing
 - Self-punishment to reduce shame or guilt
 - Increased sense of control

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Comorbidities

- Depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress
- Other DRBs
 - Compulsive sexual behavior
 - Binge-purge behavior
 - “Impulsive” aggression
- Suicidality
- Dissociation
- Substance abuse

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Importance of the therapeutic relationship and safety

- Relationship Building and Support
 - Therapist acceptance, nonjudgement, positive regard, compassion
- Acute safety issues
 - Suicidality
 - Life threatening injuries, infection, disfigurement

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Affect regulation skills and self-reference capacity

- Distress reduction and affect regulation training before trauma processing
 - Relaxation and breath training
 - Emotion identification and discrimination
 - Resisting self-injury
 - Go as long as possible, do as little as possible
 - Teaches affect tolerance



Trigger management

- Working with the Trigger Grid
 - Learned in sessions, before triggering
 - Psychoeducation about triggers
 - Identifying triggers and triggered states
 - Teaching meta-cognitive awareness of intrusive thoughts, feelings, memories
 - Learn coping strategies (self-talk, problem-solving)



Titrated exposure

- Later in treatment
- Pre-briefing and consent
- The therapeutic window
 - Undershooting versus overshooting
- Intensity control
 - Highest at mid-session
- Exploration and narrative: *Written Homework About My Trauma*



Mindfulness training

- **Mindfulness and meta-cognitive awareness**
 - Developing skill to be present-centered
 - Dispassionate observer of own thoughts and feelings, nonjudgmental, and accepting
 - Useful for de-escalation of acute states and improved affect regulation
 - “Urge” and “emotion” “surfing”



References

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