Medical Xpress

A decade of study provides insights into the world of self-injurers

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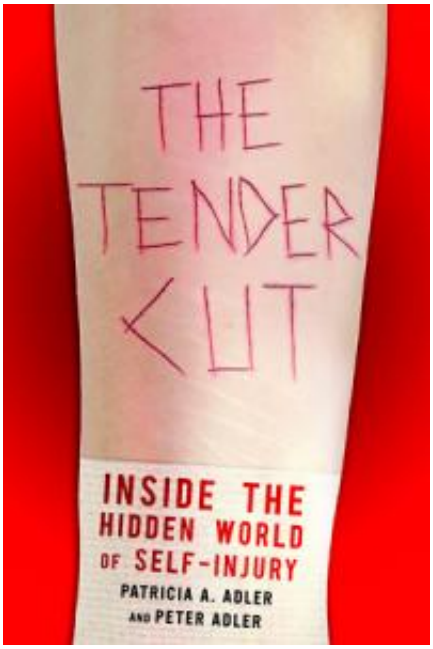

During the past 10 years two Colorado professors have collected the widest available base of knowledge about people who practice self-injury and now are offering new insights into people who deliberately injure themselves by cutting, burning, branding and bone-breaking.

Patti Adler, a professor of sociology at the University of Colorado Boulder, and Peter Adler, a professor of sociology and criminology at the University of Denver, conducted in-depth interviews with 150 self-

injurers from all over the world in addition to examining 30,000 to 40,000 Internet posts in chat rooms. Other self-injury practices include re-opening wounds, biting, scratching, hair-pulling and swallowing or embedding objects.

Before their research, studies of self-injury had primarily been conducted by psychologists or physicians, and their research subjects came from therapeutic or hospital settings, Patti Adler said. Originally thought to be a suicidal gesture, the picture that emerged from these previous studies was one of an addictive behavior practiced mostly by privileged, white teenage girls.

A completely different picture emerges when a close look is taken at all self-injurers, Adler said.

Self-injury emerged from obscurity in the 1990s and spread dramatically as a typical behavior among adolescents, she said. The practice occurs mostly among those in their teens and 20s, and can still occur in the 30s but grows more rare after age 40.

The Adlers trace the evolution of societal attitudes toward a behavior that once was highly stigmatized but now is considered more of a "thing that people do." And rather than a suicidal gesture or an addictive behavior, they found that it is a coping mechanism.

The majority of people involved in self-injury do it to deal with anxiety or emotional pain, Adler said. It "self-soothes" and gives people a sense of control. And it helps many people get over a rough patch in their lives.

"Although society was initially shocked to discover that people might harm their bodies intentionally, when compared to other ways that people seek relief from pain it offers several benefits: it's not illegal, it's

not addictive, it doesn't hurt others and the body eventually heals," Adler said. "For those trapped in bad situations, it can be a way to make it through until their lives improve."

Similarly, Internet chat rooms provide a safe place where self-injurers can find others like themselves. These sites help by making people realize their behavior does not mean they are "crazy, weak-willed, sick or bad," she said.

A host of free support groups for self-injurers are available on the Internet, Adler said. Other types of help also are available for those who want to stop including outpatient therapy, therapeutic drugs and specialized clinics that offer inpatient treatment.

"Our longitudinal data show that many people who struggle with self-injury during their formative years, like those who try drugs, eating disorders or delinquency, grow out of it to live fully functioning productive lives as professionals, parents and spouses without further problems," she said.

The Adlers research was published last month in a book titled "The Tender Cut" by New York University Press.

More information: For more information on "The Tender Cut" visit nyupress.org/books/book-details.aspx?bookId=3299

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder