



Research at a glance

A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Women Offenders

KEY WORDS: *self-injurious behaviour; women offenders; coping.*

Why we did this study

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) may be defined as deliberate bodily harm or disfigurement without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned and may include behaviours such as cutting, ligature use, burning, hitting, swallowing sharp or indigestible objects, inserting and removing objects, and head banging. NSSI poses a serious threat to the safety and well-being of offenders and staff within the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The purpose of this study was to acquire a better understanding of the motivations for engaging in NSSI and the emotions related to this behaviour among women offenders in order to inform interventions and management strategies.

What we did

Fifty-six federally sentenced women from seven institutions participated in semi-structured interviews designed to assess their history of NSSI.

What we found

Fifty-four women provided at least one reason for engaging in NSSI. The most common reason provided by the women was to cope with their negative emotions. The second most common reason was to communicate to others about their problems and their need for care.

Fifty-two women provided information on the emotions they experience before and after self-injuring. The most common emotions reported prior to engaging in NSSI were anger, depression, and anxiety. After self-injuring, women most commonly reported feelings of relief, followed by regret.

Seventeen participants discussed the relationship between NSSI and substance abuse, despite the fact that substance abuse was not part of the original interview protocol. Ten of these 17 women indicated that they were consuming drugs or alcohol while involved in NSSI or that substance abuse increased

the frequency of NSSI, while seven of these women reported that substance abuse actually decreased the frequency of NSSI or that they used drugs or alcohol as a substitute for NSSI.

Coping strategies or alternatives to NSSI were spontaneously discussed by the women in many interviews and, over time, the interviewers began to probe participants about this topic. Twenty-four participants reported that they have begun using coping strategies other than NSSI to help them deal with stress or negative emotions. The most commonly reported coping strategies were appropriate release of emotions and relaxation and distraction techniques, such as reading, exercising, creating artwork.

What it means

The current study improves our understanding of NSSI in federally sentenced women. Alternative strategies for coping have been learned by many women with histories of NSSI, often through institutional programming such as DBT. The results suggest that women offenders at risk for self-injury could benefit from exposure to training on alternative coping strategies. These strategies are consistent with current correctional program content so could be incorporated into existing core interventions.

For more information

Power, J., & Usher, A. *A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Women Offenders*. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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