



Research at a glance

A Culturally-Informed and Culturally-Safe Exploration of Self-Injury Desistance in Aboriginal Offenders

KEY WORDS: *Aboriginal offenders, interventions, self-injurious behavior, treatment, mental health*

What it means

The life experiences of Aboriginal offenders are unique and should be considered when examining behaviours such as non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Aboriginal offenders with a history of NSSI perceive participating in culturally-specific programs, substance abuse programming, and establishing strong positive social relationships as beneficial in assisting with self-injury desistance.

What we found

The majority of study participants described very difficult childhoods involving abuse, witnessing traumatic events, and involvement in early criminal activity. Several offenders expressed that they had difficulty dealing with negative emotions and many began engaging in NSSI as children or teenagers. Cutting was the most common type of NSSI. Motivations for NSSI varied; however, most offenders reported that they hurt themselves to manage negative emotions. Attention-needing and exerting interpersonal influence were also common reasons.

Participants stated that involvement in programming played an important role in NSSI desistance, especially for women. Culturally-specific programs were mentioned as being instrumental in working through past trauma and ceasing self-injury. Substance abuse programming was also important for the participants and the significance of culture was highlighted as essential during the process of healing, particularly for those offenders who had not been exposed to Aboriginal culture prior to their incarceration. Support from family and community members and institutional staff were also mentioned by the men and women as contributing to their recovery. Participants communicated that in the future they hoped to be positive role models and help others who share their experiences.

Why we did this study

NSSI includes any type of deliberately self-inflicted harm or disfigurement that is undertaken without suicidal intent. NSSI poses substantial challenges for

those who engage in the behaviour and institutional staff working with offenders who self-injure. Many offenders with a history of NSSI no longer self-injure, and while there is a growing body of research on the motivations and prevalence of NSSI, relatively little is known regarding the process of self-injury desistance.

What we did

The present study was designed to investigate, from the perspective of Aboriginal offenders, the process of NSSI desistance using a culturally-informed and culturally-safe approach. Thirteen Aboriginal offenders (nine men and four women) recruited from two minimum security Aboriginal healing lodges, a psychiatric treatment centre, and a medium security institution took part in focus groups or individual interviews. The focus groups and interviews addressed the following topics, using the analogy of the medicine wheel: 1) introduction of participants and researchers; 2) a description of NSSI history; 3) the process by which NSSI was ceased or decreased; and finally, 4) participants discussed their culture, strengths, and plans for the future. All participants had a history of NSSI (either recorded on their file or disclosed to staff) and had decreased or ceased engaging in the behaviour.

For more information

Beaudette, J.N., Nolan, A., Power, J., Varis, D.D., & Ritchie, M.B. (2014). *A Culturally-Informed and Culturally-Safe Exploration of Self-Injury Desistance in Aboriginal Offenders* (Research Report R-319). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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