



# Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

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## Self-Injury in the Media

### Who is this for?

Secondary school teachers and parents of teenagers and young adults

### What is included?

- Information about teen media usage
- Trends in portrayals of self-injury in the media
- Concerns about self-injury and social contagion
- Tips on becoming an educated media consumer

Non-suicidal self-injury is common in adolescent and young adult populations and many believe that it has become increasingly common in youth over the past decade. Between 15 and 25 percent of all teens have engaged in self-injury at some point in their lives and an increasing number know of others who self-injure. What is less clear, however, is how self-injury went from being a relatively unknown phenomenon to one quite well known among youth over a relatively short period of time. Although openly sharing self-injury experience with peers is likely to have a significant effect in spreading the behavior, it is very possible that media portrayals of self-injury have contributed to spreading practice and awareness of the behavior as well. Understanding the role of the media in spreading behaviors such as self-injury is an important step in reducing the negative impact media can have on adolescent behavior.



*For more information on self-injury, see the factsheet [What is self-injury?](#)  
Located at: [http://crpsib.com/factsheet\\_aboutsi.asp](http://crpsib.com/factsheet_aboutsi.asp)*

### What is the media and what do adolescents do with it?

What do we really mean when we talk about the media? Usually we are describing mass media, like:

- newspapers or magazines
- television
- movies
- radio
- and the Internet

Essentially, media includes any form of communication intended to pass information and messages to and between people. Because of this, video games, mobile phones, and books can also be considered “media.” Media venues are, of course, not the only influence on adolescents’ lives, but they do play a significant role.<sup>1</sup> Current data indicates that virtually all U.S. homes

contain at least one television, and most children have access to video games and the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Overall, the average youth spends 6.5 hours a day using various media, and at least a fourth of that time media “multitasking”— using more than one type of media at once. When considered together, then, the average American adolescent is exposed to an average of 8.5 total hours of media messaging each day.<sup>3</sup>

### Are all media the same?

Media use varies by gender and race as well as between interest groups or “cliques.” Different groups of teens may receive different messages, specifically targeted or customized for their peer group or demographic characteristics. Certain websites, music, and television programs, for example, are tailored toward specific groups of adolescents and may emphasize behaviors or

attitudes likely to appeal to their target audience as a means of attracting viewers or buyers.

While these media may play a positive role in teens' lives by allowing them to feel part of a larger group and by creating a cohesive sense of identity, advertisers and content creators often use this same knowledge to subtly or overtly market to them. Websites like Facebook, for example, use members' information to specify advertisements that appeal to an individual's particular demographic or interests. Manufacturers also target teens by showcasing their products as a part of a particular lifestyle. Some clothing companies, for instance, create advertisements designed to attract adolescent skateboarders by showing members of this subculture wearing their labels. Teens are a particularly desirable target audience since they tend to be open to products and messages that resonate most with their subcultures and worldviews.

### Why do teens like media so much?

Young people engage extensively with media for several reasons. First, it is an important way for teens to learn about their society and their peers. By observing the cultural norms and values presented by media, adolescents form ideas about what is expected of them and what their society views as important and valuable. Since adolescence is a crucial period for experimentation with different social roles and personalities, different media allow adolescents to see some of the potential identity choices available to them.<sup>4</sup> As such, media may serve to limit or define teens' perceptions of who they can or cannot and should or should not be. In this way, the media wields power over an extremely important part of adolescents' development.

Adolescents also turn to the media for information and help with their problems, especially with issues they may feel uncomfortable discussing with their parents or other adults.<sup>5</sup> The Internet can feel like a safe environment where teens can explore ideas or ask questions anonymously, without fear of being judged or stigmatized. For example, young people who self-injure may seek help from an online support group or message board rather than speaking to friends or teachers in person because they might fear being labeled as attention-

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seeking or crazy. However, one downside to this is that teens who rely too heavily on the Internet for help may neglect to access other important supports and resources in their lives. They may also begin to feel more comfortable in online communities than they do in everyday off-line life. An additional concern is that some information sources may be unreliable, inadequate or even dangerous.<sup>6</sup> So, when looking to understand the media's role in teens' lives, it is important to look not only at what media they view but also to consider why they turn to the specific sources they do.

**THINK ABOUT IT:** *What kinds of media do we use in our daily lives to communicate information, ideas and feelings to others? Why do we choose those media? What might be some of their positive or negative aspects?*

### Trends in media portrayals of self-injury

Since 1980, references to self-injury have dramatically increased in media venues. The amount of self-injury related content in music, film and news media has skyrocketed and continues to follow a clear upward trend. In fact, self-injury in print news media prior to 1990 was extremely rare, while researchers found 1,750 related news stories in the 2000-2005 period alone.<sup>7</sup> This increase is even more pronounced on the Internet, especially among message boards and online support groups.

Depictions of self-injury in films and on television most often feature the stereotyped image of a suburban, Caucasian female in her teens or early twenties. This profile of the troubled "cutter," while it may represent one subgroup of young people who injure, is not representative of all those who self-injure.<sup>8</sup> Research indicates that self-injury is present among a wide range of racial and socio-economic groups, and also occurs across genders. Research also shows that "cutting" is just one of the common forms used. Males who self-injure may do so in different ways than females. For instance, they are more likely to hit themselves or to provoke fights with the intention of getting hurt.<sup>9</sup> In addition to providing stereotyped or inaccurate portrayals of self-injury, media depictions also fail to show characters seeking mental or physical treatment, which many people who self-injure in real-life often do receive.



## How do media influence youth?

While it would be naïve to assume that media “causes” behaviors such as self-injury, research overwhelmingly shows that media plays a very important role in spreading ideas about behavior and normalizing unusual or rare behaviors. The media may also play a role in “priming,” or preparing, viewers to try behaviors they may have never considered, through the creation of behavior “scripts.” These behavior scripts may provide young viewers with a fallback model of how to act or react in a particular situation. Social learning theory says that people learn from copying models. Just like models from everyday life—parents, friends, or teachers—models from the media help to shape our understanding of what behaviors and attitudes are normal, acceptable, or useful.<sup>10</sup>

*Often without consciously thinking about it, children, teenagers and even adults try out the actions and attitudes they see their models using.<sup>10</sup>*

Most scholars attribute the well-documented relationship between media and aggression to the sheer volume of violent images young media viewers absorb.<sup>11</sup> For example, viewing a violent scene may “prime” individuals for aggressive thoughts, emotions, and scripts even if they are not actively aware that their thoughts and later behaviors are being affected by what they are seeing.

## Social Contagion

Ideas also spread through “social contagion.” Social contagion theory argues that ideas or behaviors can spread through populations unintentionally, just as a disease or illness might. Individuals can “catch” a new attitude or behavior from the people – or media – with whom they come into contact. Suicide contagion is one example of this. Studies consistently show that media reports of suicide tend to increase the likelihood of subsequent suicides in the geographical area exposed to the initial report.<sup>12</sup> Adolescents on average tend to be more susceptible to the suggestion of suicidal behavior than adults, which makes media glamorization of suicide, violence, and other unhealthy behaviors particularly dangerous for vulnerable teens.<sup>13</sup>

One of the negative effects of media models is that they help make certain ideas, such as self-injury or violence towards others, seem more legitimate.<sup>14</sup> For example, television shows or films like *Thirteen*, *Prison Break*, and *Seventh Heaven* show characters using self-injury to calm down and to deal with upsetting situations. Watching characters self-injure—particularly if these scenes occur often or across different shows—may increase viewers’ tolerance for the practice. It may also enhance the likelihood that a viewer will imitate the behavior, especially if the child or teen viewing the scenes identifies with or admires the character who self-injures.

## Social Contagion and Celebrities

*Celebrities can play a central role in changing people’s behaviors and attitudes. People frequently copy the behaviors of their favorite celebrities. Unfortunately, this can have negative consequences when a celebrity adopts any of a variety of unhealthy behaviors. Not only do people often emulate models, but a celebrity’s struggles and negative behaviors may receive widespread and extensive media coverage, thus increasing the number of people who may be affected by it. Certain media coverage may tend to “glamorize” the celebrity’s behavior, making it seem even more attractive. This may appeal to teenagers’ romantic and impulsive inclinations.<sup>15</sup> Celebrity suicides, for instance, are 14 times more likely to prompt copycat suicides than other suicides. Researchers found a 12% increase in suicide rates after Marilyn Monroe’s death in 1962.<sup>16</sup> Experts suggest that public disclosure or allegations of self-injury by celebrities such as Johnny Depp, Angelina Jolie and Lindsey Lohan could increase the number of people who try self-injury.<sup>17</sup>*



## Become an educated media consumer: What everyone needs to know

**Become a literate media consumer by being aware of the following facts:**

**Authorship:** Every media message was created by someone and with a purpose. The intention of an author or media outlet can influence the way in which a message is presented. Thinking about who the author or creator of a media message is will help in evaluating what information is presented in the messaging and what, if any, important information is left out.

**Accountability:** Different media allow for different levels of accountability. When people think that they will not be held accountable for what they do or say, they are more likely to act more radically or with less discretion. The companies that produce television, films, or advertising, for example, are primarily occupied with making a profit and may misrepresent or ignore facts in order to attract viewers. Accountability is also a prominent concern on the Internet where people use profiles, pseudonyms or other ways of masking their identity. In electronic bullying, anonymity frequently allows aggressors the freedom to insult or harm their victims without fear of consequences or punishment. It is important to consider the source of information in assessing its validity.

**Accuracy:** It is important to find out how accurate information or ideas presented through the media are in order to avoid drawing conclusions from incorrect or skewed information. A good first step is to find out what type of information the authors are presenting. Authors may present facts and evidence, opinion/persuasion, personal testimony, or another type of information. Knowing the type of information being presented can help guide the way in which one interacts with it. For example, personal testimonies may be a powerful way to understand the thoughts and feelings of one person who self-injures, but may not provide the more complete overview of self-injury that empirical research does. It can be helpful to review multiple sources of information and independently fact check by consulting a variety of trusted resources.

**Anonymity:** Anonymity can change how people behave. They may, for instance, act with less inhibition. This may lead to more aggressive and biased expression in some cases while in other situations may allow people to feel more open and have less fear of what others may think. On self-injury message boards or other venues for discussing self-injury online, people frequently share information, advice and personal experiences because they feel safe in the anonymity the medium affords. In these settings people may feel that

the information they share cannot be linked back to them, and therefore may believe that they do not have to worry about the same consequences, judgment and stigmatization that might arise in face-to-face interaction. As a result, many people express or reveal experiences that they have never told anyone in person. While this can be a helpful experience for some people, it is important to be cautious about sharing personal or sensitive information as it can lead to a false sense of security and intimacy.

**Privacy:** Privacy is a major concern in online interactions. People, especially young people, frequently publish personal information or opinions and engage in casual conversation online. Usually, this is done in a space that feels safe and non-threatening. However, this sense of privacy is often an illusion or limited in its scope. Information and interactions shared privately online can unexpectedly become public. Opinions, personal experiences, and images or creative works may be used or interpreted differently when viewed by a third-party such as a parent, a future employer, a school bully or an unknown, anonymous Internet user. A person should therefore never share anything online or digitally about which s/he feels doubtful or uncomfortable.

**Permanence:** While information shared over the Internet may often feel private and secure, most often it is neither of these things. Once an individual shares information online it is likely to become permanent. The web is an archive, systematically catalogued by various public and private groups interested in maintaining exact replications of the Internet at regular intervals for later research. This means that everything posted today could potentially be available

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for research and viewing many years from now. Think about what it would be like for your future 13-year-old granddaughter to find blog entries, photos, and social exchanges you made or that were posted about you at the same age!

**Pace/Speed:** Modern technology has been developed to make things faster. Online, this means that people may be posting opinions or responding to social interactions faster than they would in real life. This may lead to lapses of judgment and impulsive actions, as people respond quickly without taking time to reflect upon their decisions. Researchers have observed that argument and bullying escalates much faster online than it does in real life for this



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reason. The speed of our media often allows people to ignore consequences, forget the feelings of others, and act without thinking through their behavior. Of course, this also affects the people who produce media content. The advertising and entertainment industries are also very fast-paced environments. Writers, producers, journalists, designers and other industry professionals are expected to develop their ideas and their programming quickly. Often these people do not have the time to consider the accuracy of some of their presentations or to do the appropriate amount of research on certain issues. They might not even consider whether their portrayals of self-injury or other adolescent issues are accurate or ethical.

## Summary

Media consumption is far from a passive experience. Engaging with the media involves making decisions about which media to select, how to interact with them, and how to interpret them. Adolescents often incorporate media use into their daily lives and social interactions, and enjoy sharing their media habits with friends.<sup>18</sup> Teenagers do not usually view themselves as impressionable victims of media and media messages but rather as active participants and dictators of what is “cool” in their media world.

Decades of research show that the media is an important source of positive and negative role models for youth – for better or worse. These models introduce and normalize novel behaviors and ideas as well as provide exposure to ways of acting and thinking that they might not otherwise have considered. For all of their positive potential, most contemporary media depictions of self-injury simply reinforce stereotypes and suggest the behavior to individuals who might not have encountered it before. Media depictions of self-injury are at best incomplete and at worst unhelpful, inaccurate, and unhealthy. Teaching youth to be aware of media inaccuracies and to detect negative media influence is an important first step toward encouraging healthy reflection. By engaging critically and challenging media portrayals of self-injury and other harmful behaviors, young people help build the repertoire of skills they need to successfully navigate the contemporary media landscape. Children, teens, and the adults who care for them should be aware of what media they all use, what messages they consume, and how these media and messages may, consciously or otherwise, play a role in influencing their actions.

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