

The METROWEST DAILY NEWS

'No one would think it would be me'

By Julia Spitz
Sunday, February 26, 2006

The smile starts at the corners of light blue eyes.

"Maybe," she says, and the smile spreads.

Then there's a laugh.

This is a 15-year-old who can poke fun at herself. She's comfortable in her own skin.

That's what you'd think.

It's not exactly the way it is, though.

"In eighth grade, I was 'caught.' One of my friends told a guidance counselor about me. She was worried. The guidance counselor called my parents. They talked. (My parents) took me straight to the doctor's."

They wanted to make sure there was no infection.

"I'm not stupid. I wouldn't use a rusty nail. They don't seem to understand that."

There's a lot that's hard to understand about people who cut themselves.

"Most people are like, 'How can you do that?' 'Why do you do that?' The basic answer I give is it makes me feel better.

"No one would suspect it would be me. I've never smoked. I've never done drugs. I've never got drunk. If I were standing in a line, no one would think it would be me," said the girl self-confident enough to hold her own through an hour-long interview last week.

"I don't cut like every day. It's usually only every three or four months. It's usually only when something bad happens."

So what could be so bad?

She's an honor-roll student who likes history, English and biology "because it's easier than physics." She plays softball and field hockey at a local high school, has participated in Model United Nations, goes to the mall with her friends.

She's like most kids her age who live in a town where "nothing ever happens." Except "in the past five months, I've known four people who've died."

Trauma is a self-injury trigger, but the cutting started two years ago.

She was in her bedroom. She took a pair of scissors and sliced into the smooth white skin on her arm.

"I don't remember why. I can remember doing it, but I can't remember why I did it.

"It just felt better. It's like a release."

Now, "I try to deal with it" when the urge to cut comes, but "whenever my life is stable, there's always something else."

Like what?

"College. People (are) constantly asking, 'Well, what are you going to do?' I don't know. Leave me alone. I'm 15. And sports. 'Are you going to play this year? It'll look good on a college application.'"

And difficulty in her parents' marriage, though "I didn't cut through that whole thing. I honestly didn't."

Cutters are "definitely more likely trauma victims, kids who aren't liking themselves," said social worker Dana Zais, who runs the Wayside Day Center program in Framingham. "There's usually a bigger diagnosis going on. We see it as a symptom of something bigger."

Many times the something bigger is abuse, said Zais.

Not in this case, said "Bree," whose name isn't being used because "once someone finds out, it changes their view of you. I don't want anyone judging me."

"I have personally never been abused by my parents. My parents love me," she said.

"Technically, I've stopped and I'm cured," Bree said, her fingers putting air quotation marks around "cured."

"There's always that deception," said Bree.

"It's not easy for them to stop," said Zais. With most people who cut, "there's intense emotion that needs to get out." The act of cutting "changes the brain chemistry. It sends out endorphins after you do it."

"I honestly think it's widespread, but nobody talks about it," said Bree.

"I think it's an epidemic," said Zais. "Kids are hearing about it and trying it and it's working for them."

On the other hand, "cutting is a very isolating, private thing," said Zais. "Real cutters don't want people to know they're cutting. It becomes an addiction," one they'd rather hide than stop.

Bree keeps a diary.

"It's the journal where I write when I cut. And I write (about) major events. And I write poetry."

The last entry is Feb. 4.

"This time the trigger was (a family member's) friend died.

"The first couple of times I did it, in eighth grade, I cut too deep and I did get scars," said Bree. "Now I don't cut deep enough (to get scars). I don't want that."

What she wants is for people to understand, and for those who self-injure to feel comfortable asking for help.

"I don't want people to think cutters are depressed, all wearing black." Or "emos," meaning emotional people who write music and poetry. "Most kids my age associate cutting with emo."

In fact, "there is no simple portrait of a person who intentionally injures him/herself," according to helpguide.org.

"There are no clear warning signs of cutting that I know of," said Zais, and cutting isn't the only method of self-injury.

Burning is also common, but "I could never burn myself," said Bree. "Honestly, that would hurt way too much."

"Most cutters aren't suicidal," said Zais. It's somewhat like bulimia, she said. "It's getting the bad out of them.

"There's this numbness that happens. A lot of the kids say they don't feel the pain. There's a disassociation that happens before the act," said Zais.

There's not even much of a mess.

"I usually get like a facecloth or something else. Like a paper towel," said Bree. "I'll just throw it out (after the blood is cleaned up), not on top of the trash, obviously."

Not where her parents would see it and immediately start asking questions.

"Parents shouldn't blame themselves if their kids are cutting and they don't know it," said Zais.

Self-Injury Awareness Day is March 1