

# Redemption on the **Razor's Edge**

ONE COVENANTER'S STORY OF CUTTING | Anonymous

*This article is about cutting, a form of self-injury. If you struggle with this problem and if you are feeling vulnerable, take care of yourself while reading this. Read it with someone who cares about you, and check the sidebars regarding options for help.*

I started cutting myself in college. I took whatever sharp object I could find in my dorm room—scissors, pins—and made half a dozen slashes on my arm until they bled. I thought about suicide, but I didn't really want to die. I felt powerless, helpless, and voiceless. I was angry—angry at the world, at my friends, at the church, and at God. Above all, I was angry at myself for not being good enough and even for being angry.

The precipitating event that led to cutting was a road trip I took with friends. By the end of the trip we weren't getting along. None of us knew how to talk it out. The situation got so bad that by the end, my friends were no longer speaking to me. I didn't understand their avoidance, and I felt both a lot of anger that I didn't know how to handle and also a lot of self-hatred.

My road trip companions had been my main support system, and when they were gone, I didn't have any outlet for the pressures of life. I hadn't diversified my friendships enough to have more than one group of friends. At the same time I was overwhelmed by not knowing who I was or what I was going

to do with my future. I just shut down, unable to cope with my future, my lack of identity, or my confused feelings—especially my anger and self-loathing. Cutting let me express my rage and escape without using words.

Cutting gave me an emotional break. I felt relief. Strangely, perhaps, I also felt a sense of control; I could make myself feel better by releasing the rage in this way. Since expressing my rage verbally would have been unacceptable anywhere else, this became my way of getting rid of it. Cutting gave me an emotional release—it felt good.

Christian psychologist John Stapert says that is a common feeling among cutters. It sounds strange. How could cutting yourself feel good? But when there's a lot of misery inside, the physical pain serves as a kind of distraction from the emotional pain, and the release of the rage—or whatever the negative emotion is—feels good at the time.

I felt like I was “stuck” in all areas of my life. I had strict ideas about who I was supposed to be and how life was supposed to be lived. I grew up in an atmosphere where there were very strict expectations about what made a good Christian. And my life wasn't matching the standards. I thought I was either bad or good. There wasn't any tolerance for me to just be human and growing. So when friendships, school, or grades weren't perfect, I took the failures inside myself. I didn't know how to get

help or where to look, and I was too scared to seek help anyway. That contributed to the “stuck” feeling.

In the very few studies about people who cut, researchers have found that cutters see life as black and white, and they struggle with perfectionism. It never occurred to me that I could just be a human who was working out some stuff. I was either good or bad—there was no in-between.

Some of this inability to see myself as just a struggling human came from my personality. And some of it came from misunderstanding what it meant to be a Christian. I don't know if I just heard “be perfect for your heavenly Father is perfect” and took that literally, or if I actually was taught that I could be perfect, and if I wasn't, I was bad.

The more common methods of escape, such as drugs, alcohol, and sex, weren't options because I still was trying to be good. Cutting, however, made sense. I figured, in my way of understanding things, that I deserved cutting. I was punishing myself for not being good enough.

When I cut I experienced “dissociation.” Stapert explains that dissociation involves feeling detached from one's own mental processes or body—as if one is an outside observer. It feels a little like being in a dream but still “in touch” with reality, even while somehow detached from it.

When I cut, I felt momentarily re-



moved from my emotional angst. The physical pain mirrored the emotional pain and made it visible. I saw it in a way that I didn't know how to express verbally or in the context of a relationship. It seemed to me that people wouldn't be able to handle my emotions if I expressed them honestly, and they would certainly be repulsed by my cutting.

Although unwilling to let anyone know what I was doing, I did make an attempt to seek help. I went to the university's counseling service, but I didn't tell them I was cutting. They said I was fine and didn't need counseling. I wasn't brave enough to try again.

My healing began when I heard the story of a large crew-cut Marine—the last person you would expect to be a cutter. One day in college he told me he used to cut himself. He asked me questions about my cutting. Most of all, he encouraged me to stop. Healing started for me when someone was brave enough to share his story and then ask the hard questions without being judgmental.

An important part of the healing process involved my attendance at a communion service with a focus on

healing. I was very aware that I was in some serious need of help, but I hadn't told anyone about it. And there were people there to pray for individuals as they went forward for communion. When I went forward, the server said, "This is the body of Christ, torn apart for you, so you might be put back together."

I had gone to church my whole life, but I had never heard the bread offered in that way before. I was tearing myself apart.

Those words were for me. For the

### How Widespread Is Cutting?

Nobody knows for certain. According to a recent study, 17 percent of students at Cornell and Princeton said they cut. According to hospital statistics, 1.5 percent of the U.S. population has self-harmed. Statistics on cutting are likely to be low because people who cut hide it well. (And usually they do not cut to kill themselves but just to counter emotional pain.)

Generally women and people under thirty cut more than other groups. However, cutting crosses all gender, socio-economic, and racial lines. □

first time I thought about how Christ was cut up and torn up on the cross so I could be made whole. God saw me and understood. I left that service not healed but feeling enough hope to call a counselor.

Two things were influential in my healing. First, I had to choose to get better. Healing is nearly impossible if it's not chosen. And healing is a journey, not usually an immediate "fix." It was after this communion service that I decided that I was going to choose life and healing, whatever the cost.

The other influential thing has been the resources of community, counseling, books, and prayer. Counseling was a huge part of helping in this area. Getting professional help from a counselor is not something to be ashamed about. It's a great resource.

Recently I shared my story with my church community group. We meet in each other's homes and take turns telling our stories. I had known my turn was coming for weeks, and in all that time I just couldn't bring myself to prepare anything. I couldn't decide how brave to be in telling my story.

Two people were visiting for the first time that night, and I almost didn't talk

because of that. But I started, I felt the love of my group. These friends were good listeners. They asked great questions and were not afraid.

Afterward, one of the younger members of our group came up to me. A beautiful, intelligent eighteen-year-old, she had bandages on her arms—covering up cuts—that night. She said, “I have hope now, after hearing your story.”

Earlier that week she had found herself wandering in a local park. She wasn’t on drugs or drinking. She had a dissociative experience. These are common for people who cut. That dissociative experience, frightening in itself, combined with hearing my story, opened her to the possibility of counseling. She is just beginning her journey, but it was a powerful first step.

I left that night knowing that God showed up. The timing of my story and this young woman’s being open to counseling and being brave enough to come out of hiding must have been something that God arranged.

As I look back, I can see how far I have come. I went from not being able to name what I was feeling to thinking clearly and being able to ask for help. I had been mentally muddy and felt as if I were drowning. Cutting was my escape. Now I can say how I feel, and I can identify the safe and healthy resources I have available to me.

I am a witness to what I couldn’t see before—that when I cry out for help, God gives me sustenance to make it through that day. And that is all I need. Best of all I am learning that by telling my story, I can walk with others in their journey of healing and find even more healing for myself in the process. □

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### BOOKS

#### ***Bodily Harm***

Karen Conterio, Wendy Lader, with Jennifer K. Bloom (Hyperion, 1999)

#### ***Reviving Ophelia***

Mary Piper (Penguin, 2005)

#### ***Teenage Girls: Exploring Issues Adolescent Girls Face and Strategies to Help Them***

Ginny Olson (Zondervan, 2006)

#### ***Cutting: Self Injury and Emotional Pain*** (e-book)

Elaina Whittenhall (InterVarsity Press)

#### ***A Bright Red Scream: Self-mutilation and the Language of Pain***

Marilee Strong (Penguin, 1998)

### ON THE WEB

[www.self-injury.org](http://www.self-injury.org)

[www.selfinjury.com](http://www.selfinjury.com)

[www.palace.net/~llama/psych/injury.html](http://www.palace.net/~llama/psych/injury.html) (Secret Shame)



## I’ve been cutting myself. What can I do to stop?

Ask for help. Friends, parents, youth-groups leaders, or teachers are good options. Go to someone who won’t freak out when you say you cut yourself—someone who can hear all that is inside you.

Find a good counselor and begin the long journey towards healing.

Get your feelings out and seen in any way you can. Draw, throw clay, compose music, paint, listen to music, or read books that help you name what’s going on in you.

Exercise is helpful no matter what you are struggling with. So walk, run, bike, and dance like crazy.

Pray. Sit still and ask God for help. Not just a quick prayer—take a few minutes to talk with God. Express your feelings—all of them—to God and choose life. □

## For Parents

It can be a shocking thing to learn your child is cutting, especially if they have been “good kids,” never causing a lot of trouble. If you suspect that your son or daughter cuts, the first step is to gather as much help and as many resources as you can find so that you are prepared to talk with them about it. Withhold anger and judgment, because that will only make things worse and increase your child’s desire to cut. They are already hurting and punishing themselves.

Find ways of letting your kids voice the things they are angry about in a healthy way. If they don’t have somewhere to put their emotions, cutting may feel like their only option for getting release. Encourage them to go to counseling.

**Some things to watch for:** Cutting can become an ad-

diction and it’s not going to just stop. Even if the person is caught, and the cuts on their arms disappear, that doesn’t mean the cutting has stopped. They may have just started on their stomach so it won’t show.

Remember, cutting is just a symptom of an underlying pain. So don’t try and manage the symptoms alone. Cutting actually soothes because it can off-set emotional pain. Keep encouraging your child to talk to someone about the underlying pain. If they won’t see a counselor maybe they will see a mentor or a spiritual director.

You can’t force them to quit. They have to choose safe alternatives. But you can give them safe options to express themselves. □