

## In their own words . . .

Some people may wonder why the people of Self-Injury: HOPE feel that a national day of outreach and awareness is necessary. After all, it seems as though doctors should be able to deal competently with self-inflicted injuries.

In reality, seeking medical treatment can be more traumatic than the incident that prompted the self-harm. People seeking treatment of self-inflicted wounds are often met with hostility, contempt, and apathy at the emergency room. It is not unusual for wounds to be stitched without anesthesia or for patients to be told that their treatment is a waste of the doctor's time. Some people have to fight off being involuntarily committed simply because they have cuts or burns they have given to themselves.

The following quotes come from questionnaires completed on the Secret Shame web site. They represent a tiny fraction of the thousands of people who've shared their feelings about and experiences of self-injury via this questionnaire. The stories may seem shocking, but no one who has sought treatment for self-injury will be terribly surprised by what these people report.

At first, I was always going to the ER and the doctors were often angry and retributive about it. They would ask if I was suicidal, and then seem disgusted when I said no. A lot of times they sent me to the psych ward. Dealing with the reactions of doctors was one of the worst aspects of living with this problem for me -- it traumatized me quite a bit. It seems to bring out the worst in lots of people, but doctors especially, and psychiatrists more especially. [Female, age 39, 27 years SIB off and on, BA]

Many times [I've been] medically treated. Been stitched and stapled without anaesthetic. Had steri-strips on deep cuts that immediately came open and were then left. Been told off. Been told I was wasting people's time. Been told I was lying when I went back after the stitches came undone. Have been met with "oh, my god!" when seeing my legs. Been lectured once how I shouldn't have done it. I avoid hospitals if at all possible although some individuals have been very good to me. [Female, age 28, 3 years SIB]

Mostly I will take care of my own injuries. I hate hospitals. When I go to a hospital for something else they look at my arm and give me a bad attitude like I'm crazy or something or whisk me away to another hospital for mental problems. [Female, age 24, 4 years SIB, some college, CNA/certified EKG tech]

I've been medically treated around ten times. Of course several [doctors have been angry/abusive] -- that's when they sew you up without a shot to deaden first. Like you deserve more pain [because you] do that to yourself. I wish there were more understanding and help out in the real world. [Female, age 39, 12 years SIB, 12 years education]

The doctor gave me 20 stitches without anesthetic. [Female, age 27, 16 years SIB]

One night the [doctor on call] knew me. I had already been there earlier in the day after cutting my mid- and upper abdominal area with a razor blade. There had been a change in shift but the nurses told him I was seen earlier by the other doctor. I wouldn't have gone in for the wrist except I was sitting in my car at a park and someone reported me to the police and they came and called the medics. When this doctor came in I was holding the gauze on my wrist applying pressure. He jerked it off, took one look at it, and threw the gauze back in my lap and said, "I don't have time for this shit! I will come back later." He stormed out. A few minutes later the nurse came in and yelled at me because I didn't have the gauze on my wrist. I tried explaining it was the Dr.'s fault but it didn't go over really well. He came back in about 45 min later. He said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that but I am so busy I don't have time for things like this especially when it's intentional." I just sat there because I couldn't do anything else with the police right outside my room. Believe me I am a lot more careful now! [Female, age 30, 2 years SIB, Associate Degree]

I have been treated 5 times, 2 of which were very serious. I only had one doctor who was really rude to me, but almost all of the nurses acted like I was a waste of time. [Male, 16, 4 years of SIB, HS graduate]

Oh yeah, I have had to go to the ER for cutting too deep with glass, and the nurses and doctors there acted very strange and mad. I do not cut or burn for sympathy, I do not want sympathy from anyone, and I just want to be treated for my injuries and left the hell alone. [Female, age 22, 2 years SIB, 3 years college]

We have been stitched up a few times and doctors have definitely pulled attitude. We learned very quickly that if we do need medical help we contact our therapist first so the ER doctors don't admit us to the Mental Health unit automatically. We also depend on tape stitches (steri-strips) a lot. [Female, age 46]

I was treated for cuts on my arms before I was admitted to the psych ward. This has happened twice. I had walked into busy traffic and had open cuts on my arms. They treated me at the ER for the cuts... and yes the doctor pulled attitude. He told me that what I did was completely stupid and uncool. He didn't understand at all. He just kept saying over and over how uncool my cutting was. He told me to get a tattoo. I laughed. [Female, age 19, 5 years SIB, AA degree]

I was taken into a clinic one time, and the doctors were extremely rude. This one grabbed me by the arm and started asking me what all the symbols I had carved into myself meant. Then he started lecturing me. [Female, age 19, 3 years SIB, college sophomore]

Yes, [I've been treated by] 3 doctors [and received] anger, indifference, lack of compassion; some treated me as if I were a nut case. [Unspecified]

I had seven stitches put in my wrist. The nurse who took out the stitches was very kind until she saw where the cut was and all the scars around it. After that she was very terse and impersonal. [Male, 21, 6 years of SIB, BA]

The doctor was very angry and stitched my wrist with no anesthesia. It was like he wanted to teach me a lesson, but instead he taught me that I could withstand even more pain than I thought. I stared him in the face and refused to flinch. [Female, 32, 24 years of SIB, 2 years of college]

I had to see a shrink and I seriously think that he did not know about cutters at all and was an asshole to me and that is why I am not seeking help now even though I desperately need it. [Female, age 16, 4 years SIB, junior in high school, honor student]

I have been called crazy by a doctor! [Female, 32, 12 years SIB, Master's degree]

I have been medically treated four times. In each case, yes, the doctors pulled major attitude. ("We're gonna bring the law into this" "You need to be back in inpatient treatment") [Female, age 22, 7 years SIB, some college]

A year and a half after I stopped all SI, I had to have surgery to remove a breast cyst. Afterwards, I developed a minor surgical infection; when I saw the surgeon for follow-up, he asked me if I had put anything into the drainage tubes at the incision site. I was angry but said nothing. A few months later, I had a skin infection on the other breast and was referred to the same surgeon. He asked me if I had injected anything into my breast, and this time I told him calmly that I found his question and the implications behind it insulting. He asked it again and said, "If you're going to be my patient, I have to ask you this, given your history." My "history" was of cutting and burning specific sites on my left arm. I found another doctor; I will not be treated by a person who does not know the difference between self-injury and Munchausen's and who is not capable of basic respect. [Female, age 35, 3 years SIB, BS]

I made the mistake of being honest with an ER doc once. He called the police and had me [committed] to the state mental hospital (even though I had insurance AND enough money to pay for a private hospital). I was not given the choice of another hospital... I NEVER made the mistake of telling another doctor. Now I go to a different hospital every time...sometimes I travel for more than an hour to get treatment. Luckily I live in a huge metro area... there are a lot of medical facilities. [Female, age 29, 23 years SIB, Ph.D.]

I was told, "if you cut on yourself, you should expect it to hurt." [Female, age 25, 13 years SIB, some college]

Doctors have pulled definite attitude on me. I was told one time that I could be sent to the insane hospital and they would make sure I stopped hurting myself one way or another! [Female, age 28, 18 years SIB, BA]

I've been given a lot of grief by both doctors and nurses who have seen my scars (my scars are on my left arm most often the one they grab for blood pressure) -- grilled about it you might say. They act as though they've uncovered something severe or awful about me. One after the other -- I'm interrogated, expected to admit things that aren't true. I've never sought help for my deep cuts for fear of being locked up. [Female, age 28, 20 years SIB]

I was in an outpatient program for my anxiety when the unit was shut down and all of the psych people were moved to the drug unit. I got real scared and being outpatient went home and cut. The next day when asked what happened I told, then tried to leave after I quit crying. They then called the police to my home. I knew the officer and told him I had cut at work; he understood and said that since I had gotten it stitched up that I was fine. They left. I never went back to the unit, and never resolved the anxiety problems. [Female, age 38, 2 years college]

Whenever doctors notice my scars, the only reaction I've gotten was, "Don't do that." [Female, age 20, 3 years SIB, college sophomore]

Last time I was hospitalized, I cut myself while I was on the psychiatric unit. I was put in isolation without lights. One of the psychiatric nurses told me I used people up and that from then on, no one would tell me when or where groups were going to be held (group leaders would come around and gather people for their groups) and I would only be allowed 15 minutes a day to talk to any of the nurses. Fortunately, I told my psychiatrist about this, and she put a stop to this nurse being assigned to me for the rest of my stay. Is it a wonder I signed out AMA? [Female, age 47, 3.5 years college.]

I've been treated many times for self-inflicted injuries, and my experiences have varied dramatically. Sometimes I get a cocky jackass doctor (males and females) who offers only "This was stupid of you to do. Quit doing it. Problem solved" attitude. Frequently they bring in a social worker/psychologist to evaluate me before they'll let me go. I also have been diagnosed with bipolar disorder for about 9 years, so I'm sure they want to cover bases, but reality-based questions such as, "What day is it? Who is our president?" really crack me up! [Female, age 32, 26 years SIB, some college]

I have been medically treated for self-injury. I've lost track of how many times. The doctors that have treated me have been real jerks, nicely putting it. A doctor told me sometimes there are people they just can't help and them ones are the ones who end up dead, and I may be one of those people. [Female, age 26, 5 years SIB, Associates Degree]

The doctors always seem to think I am totally crazy. I had one doctor refuse to treat me because he said, "I treat people every day that can't help what has happened to them, and then you come in here hurting yourself and waste my time..." [Female, age 20. 8 years SIB, senior in college]

Sometimes doctors have attitudes but I get one right back . . . just because I have this small problem doesn't make them better than me and I will not tolerate disrespect. [Male, age 27, 6 years SIB, 10 years education]

I cut with a blade on my arm. I am a bleeder so I had to tell my mum and go to the E-room. The doctors treated me like I was a nut case, suicidal. [Female, age 17, 4 years SIB, high school senior in a college scholarship program]

I've had to go to A&E quite a few times too. Often they are OK but I've had enough bad experiences to make me very wary and anxious about seeking medical treatment. I've had doctors at A&E refuse to suture wounds in case I interfere with the stitches. Unclosed wounds can take a couple of months to heal, and all the time they are healing they remind me that the doctor didn't think I was worth treating. One doctor was brilliant, he really cared about controlling the pain and I was able to talk to him a bit about trying to limit the amount of damage. Other doctors have just stuck their fingers in wounds without any consideration of pain. [Female, age 24, 8 years SIB] (A&E is the British term for emergency room.)

I'm a medic and know when to stop and what to do if I didn't stop in time. I came close to having to go to the ER a few times, but managed on my own - because of the shame and knowing I'd be instantly labeled for life. [Male, age 23, 3 years SIB, medical student]

Most docs do not know how the injury occurs, and I do not offer an explanation. Go to the busiest ER I can find and they don't have time to ask questions. Have had a few doctors pull an attitude on how it is taking them away from helping people who truly need it. [Female, age 35, 30 years SIB, college graduate]

They actually injected me with novocaine eight times for about a one-and-a-half inch wide and about two inches deep cut. It was almost as if they were trying to hurt me for it. The doctor wasn't nice to me and he said, "Why do you do this?" I sat there for three hours waiting and then they said they wanted me to be put in a hospital. I said no because I wasn't suicidal so they tried to commit me. I went in front of the magistrate and he ruled in favor of me and let me go. [Female, age 24, Masters student]