

Tips for dealing with self-harming behavior

What is nonsuicidal self-injury disorder?

Nonsuicidal self-injury disorder (NSSID) describes a deliberate injury of your own body – usually the arms, legs, or hands – by cutting, biting, burning, scratching, hitting yourself, or other means. Many studies show that NSSI can occur along with a mental health disorder (such as anxiety disorders, depression, borderline personality disorder) as well as separately.

Why do people self-harm?

NSSI brings about short-term relief from an unpleasant emotional state through its stimulating/dampening effect or the attention it attracts from others.

However, the individual causes of NSSI are not addressed through this action and therefore the problem remains. In addition, long-term negative consequences such as shame or physical damage follow.

It is not easy to dismantle NSSI, especially because it provides short-term relief from distressing emotions. Alternative strategies need to be practiced vigorously and patiently before they take effect.

Strategies for coping with self-harm

The following tips are meant to help you understand the issue better and to take first steps toward dismantling it.

1. Observe tension, identify early warning signs

NSSI usually follows a state of heightened tension. Tension levels of over 70% can leave NSSI sufferers feeling that they have no choice but to self-harm. Careful observation of your own level of tension and the accompanying symptoms is important in order to be able to deduce early warning signs and find alternate ways of dealing with the tension (ideally, before the state of heightened tension is reached).

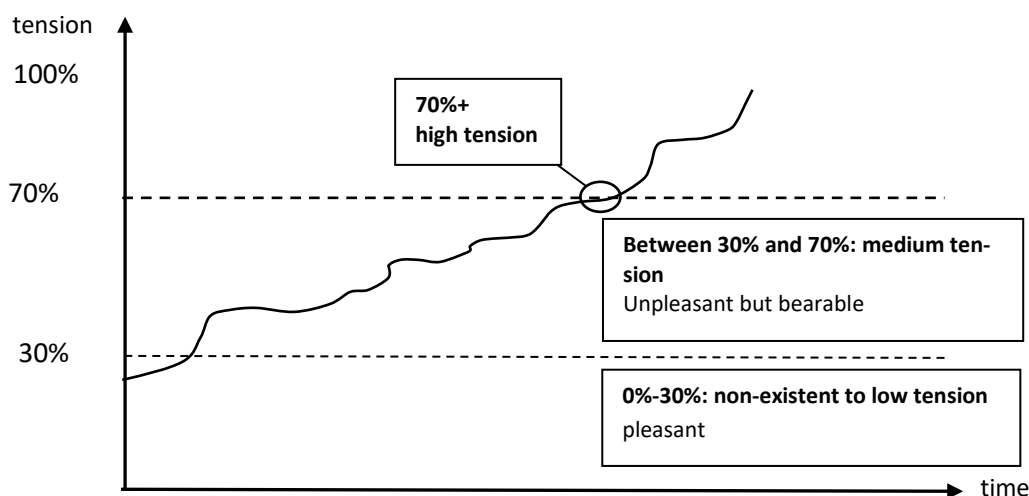


Figure 2: *Tension Curve*.
According to Bohus & Wolf-Arehult (2013).

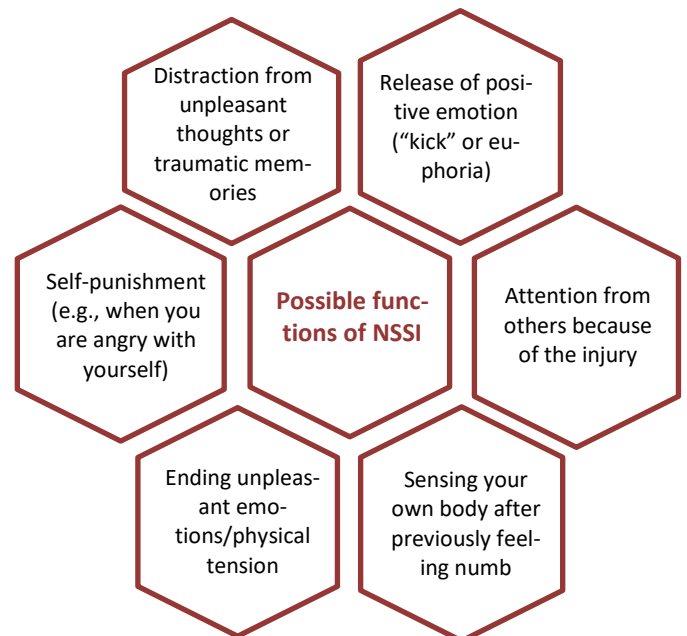


Figure 1: *Possible functions of the NSSI*.
According to: In-Albon, Plener, Brunner & Kaess

The following table is intended to give you an overview of possible early warning signs. You can mark the warning signs you recognize for yourself and add others.

Table 1: My early warning signs

Thoughts	Emotions	Bodily Sensations	Behavior
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm not pretty enough	<input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/> Sweating	<input type="checkbox"/> Inability to sit still
<input type="checkbox"/> I can't get anything done	<input type="checkbox"/> Anger	<input type="checkbox"/> Dizziness	<input type="checkbox"/> Pacing
<input type="checkbox"/> I need to distract myself	<input type="checkbox"/> Guilt	<input type="checkbox"/> Racing heart	<input type="checkbox"/> Irritability
<input type="checkbox"/> Nobody likes me	<input type="checkbox"/> Sadness	<input type="checkbox"/> Nausea	<input type="checkbox"/> Fighting
<input type="checkbox"/> Harming myself helps immediately	<input type="checkbox"/> Distrust	<input type="checkbox"/> Unease	<input type="checkbox"/> Threatening
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm not cool enough	<input type="checkbox"/> Shame	<input type="checkbox"/> Rapid breathing	<input type="checkbox"/> Retreat
<input type="checkbox"/> _____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____	_____	<input type="checkbox"/> _____

2. Finding alternative strategies ("skills")

The strategies that help you regulate your emotions in cases of high tension and highly emotional situations in the short-term and, at the same time, don't harm you in the long run, are called coping skills. These skills work on different levels:

2.1 Behavioral skills for when you feel an urge to take action

- **Physical distraction:** exercise, craft something, write, play an instrument...
- **Opposite action:** doing the opposite of the original impulse to take action in order to weaken the emotional reaction. Some examples:

Table 2: Examples of opposite action

Emotion	Trigger	Urge	Opposite action
Anger	Violation of boundary	Attack	Leave the situation
Fear	Threat	Flee	Confront
Sadness	Loss	Withdraw, search for comfort	Be active, search for distraction
Shame	Flaw	Disappear	Show yourself
Guilt	Wrongdoing	Apologize	Don't apologize

2.2 Body-related skills for when you have a strong physical reaction

- **Strong sensory stimulus:** take a cold shower, eat chillis or a sour candy, squeeze a spiky tactile ball, snap a rubber band on your wrist...
- **Movement:** go for a jog, run up and down stairs, swim, chop wood, hit a punching bag, tear paper...
- **Relaxation:** imaginary journey, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercise, sauna...

2.3 Mental skills for when you have negative thoughts

- **Mental distraction:** do a crossword puzzle or sudoku, count backwards in steps of 7...
- **Interrupt your thoughts:** interrupt negative thoughts with a "STOP" and focus on or do something else
- **Worry time:** Set aside a specific time of day somewhere quiet (about 30 minutes) in order to constructively focus on your thoughts. Otherwise, apply interruption techniques.

Last but not least: Try out the skills – this way you can find the strategies that work for you. You should practice the skills in neutral situations or situations where you are experiencing low tension, they will only start to work in high-stress situations if you have practiced them consistently. Ideally, you can create a chain of different skills following each other which work on different levels.

And remember: It's completely normal to fall back into old patterns of behavior every now and then, since these were "automated" reactions for a long time. Keep at it anyway. It's worth it!

Literature:

In-Albon, T., Plener, P. L., Brunner, R., & Kaess, M. (2015). *Selbstverletzendes Verhalten* (Vol. 19). Göttingen: Hogrefe. Bohus, M. & Wolf-Arehult, M. (2013). *Interaktives Skillstraining für Borderline-Patienten*. Stuttgart: Schattauer.