



MARILEE STRONG

With an Introduction by Armando Favaza, M.D.
Includes a Treatment and Informational Resources Section

A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain

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Self-mutilation is a behavior so shocking that it is almost never discussed. Yet estimates are that upwards of eight million Americans are chronic self-injurers. They are people who use knives, razor blades, or broken glass to cut themselves. Their numbers include the actor **Johnny Depp**, **Girl Interrupted** author **Susanna Kaysen**, and the late **Princess Diana**. Mistakenly viewed as suicide attempts or senseless masochism--even by many health professionals--"cutting" is actually a complex means of coping with emotional pain. Marilee Strong explores this hidden epidemic through case studies, startling new research from psychologists, trauma experts, and neuroscientists, and the heartbreaking insights of cutters themselves--who range from troubled teenagers to middle-age professionals to grandparents. Strong explains what factors lead to self-mutilation, why cutting helps people manage overwhelming fear and anxiety, and how cutters can heal both their internal and external wounds and break the self-destructive cycle. **A Bright Red Scream** is a groundbreaking, essential resource for victims of self-mutilation, their families, teachers, doctors, and therapists.

A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain Details

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From Reader Review A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain for online ebook

darrienmichael says

I read this book a while back but I remember it being interesting and full of true facts and stimulating interpretation. If you are a cutter, or if you know a cutter, this book will help you to understand the emotionally painful and taboo subject. Psychology students should also read this book.

Jay Shahwan says

This difficult book came to me out of necessity, as my life has been upended by a loved one who chose to self-injure. It's a phenomenon that's quite common, I've come to understand, and I needed to learn how to reach out to someone whose pain was so imbedded that the only possible solution was to cut. The author's interviews were both horrible and enlightening. Not for the faint of heart.

Judi sampson-young says

This is an incredible book. I am a cutter so of course that was my pull. Its full of a lot of "psycho-babble" and normally I skim read when this kind of text arises, but this time I just put the book down for a while and came back and Im glad I did. This book covers all parasuicidal behaviors: cutting, burning, head banging, pulling out ones own hair, etc. It discusses at great length the psychology of it, the reasons why and what the person gets out of it; all of which is gathered through data collecting from these individuals. In between all this there are stories about real "cutters" and short but very poignant interviews. It was wonderful to see and hear myself and how I feel in writing. It made me feel connected to something, even though I would like to find that connection in healthier ways. I would like to say that this book may make parasuicidals act out; it did for me. I fantasized about it while reading and I can honestly say that if not for my DBT group I might have.

Sarah Crawford says

book by Marilee Strong, 1998

Marilee Strong is a journalist. She obviously did very, very extensive research for this book and the hard effort she made is very obvious and helps the book considerably.

This is not, of course, a happy book. It's filled with personal stories of people who have been through extremely intense physical and/or emotional pain and who have found the need to practice SIV, or Self Inflicted Violence, which is most often associated with cutting but can also include hiding and other forms of self-abuse.

(In the section below I will separate my own thoughts by () so you won't confuse what the author knows

with what I think is true.)

The author notes that about 2 million Americans each year commit some act of self-injury. That is 30 times the rate of suicide attempts and 140 times the rate of successful suicide attempts.

One of the quotes that I found most interesting from a cutter is this:

"I hate myself. It's almost an insult for people to refer to it as a self-esteem problem. I'm talking active, passionate hatred." (People who practice any form of SIV are not people who are at ease with themselves or with the others around them. They often feel trapped; inadequate, alone in constant emotional upheaval and pain. They very likely see no ending at all to their situation. Imagine living every hour of every day hating yourself, hating the situation you are in, and knowing that you are trapped in that situation.)

Self-injurers are also not people who are stupid. "Self-injurers are often bright, talented, creative achievers-perfectionists who push themselves beyond all human bounds, people pleasers who cover their pain with a happy face." (This is somewhat similar to the Japanese practice of having "two faces." One face is that which you present to those around you; the other face, usually hidden, is your "real" face, how you really feel about things, not necessarily how society expects you to feel.)

Even someone as famous, rich and beautiful as Princess Diana was a cutter. In an interview she said "You have so much pain inside yourself that you try and hurt yourself on the outside because you want help."

Not only can these self-injurer hate himself or herself, but their can be a terrible amount of darkness within them. In describing one particular cutter the author says: "She could never cut deep enough-down to the impenetrable blackness, the pitiless void- to release all the rage and emptiness inside her." .

(One way to picture this is to think of a bog. A bog is a pond, the surface of which is covered by a dense growth of plants. To all appearances it appears as solid ground, but if you step on it you could end up going through the plants and into the water below. Now imagine that this pond is a pond filled with painful memories, emotional hurt, rejection, any form of personal darkness you can think of. The plant surface represents the very slender margin for a self-injurer between dealing with everyday things and falling through the plants into the darkness below.)

(For most people, the pond is small and the plant growth on top is pretty much equal to a solid forest floor, but for self-injurers that margin is very narrow. They might even be afraid to express emotion, terrified that they might fall into that pond and loss mental and emotional control of themselves.)

She writes on another page: "They most commonly described themselves as feeling empty inside, unable to express emotions in words, afraid of getting close to anyone and wanting to desperately stop their emotional pain." (In other words, the self-injurer, at some level, really wants help but their fear of getting close to someone and trusting them can be the very thing that prevents them from getting the help they need.)

So why does a person injure themselves on purpose? The cutting (or other form of injury) might give the person a temporary relief from their anxiety, their stress, their "dark thoughts." (It can also be used to regain self-control if the person feels that he or she is about to "lose it" in front of others. It can also be a form of punishment against oneself for real or perceived things the person has done in their life.)

The author says that, behind the symptoms of traumatic stress in self-injurers "...is a range of painful childhood experiences, including emotional deprivation, physical neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse,

sexual abuse and childhood loss."

Notice that physical and sexual abuse are not the only things that can lead to cutting. Emotional deprivation, living growing up without any kind of emotional nurturing in the home, can lead to later problems. (Also, I think that some things not listed above could also be causes such as poor peer relations, constant rejections on overtures of friendship and/or dating and similar childhood/teenage problems might also contribute to the "traumatic stress" that can lead to SIV.)

Another interesting factor that might contribute to cutting is "real or perceived" loss or abandonment. "Self-injurers are acutely sensitive to abandonment. Because they never properly attached to and then separated from their early caretakers, they live in a perpetual state of separation anxiety so unbearable it feels annihilating."

The younger the age at which trauma happens in a life influences how long- term the problems of SIV can become. One very interesting section is this:

"She feels different, defective, out of control. She can neither soothe herself nor trust others to comfort her. There may be large parts of her history she cannot remember." (I doubt anyone can recall virtually anything they ever did, but a person such as this might find recalling childhood experiences to be almost impossible. They might be able to remember perhaps one or two things, but the vast majority of their childhood simply isn't there. Thinking about it conjures up virtually nothing. It's as if the person has an internal VCR that is taping everything that happens to them then is automatically erasing most of that tape.)

The author notes that self-injurers can be, basically, overly sensitive to "perceived threats." Something that, to an objective observer might not seem threatening at all, can be perceived as very threatening by a self-injurer and can trigger an episode of cutting, etc.

The author notes that many women have somewhat negative feelings about their bodies (no doubt, in my opinion, to television ads, programs and magazines that set up an almost impossible physical ideal for women to attain), "...the level of shame and disgust self-injurers feel is in another dimension entirely. We're talking hate, malevolence..." (To a much lesser extent some men have the same type of feelings, but I don't think there feelings about their bodies are tied as closely to their inner core being as are the feelings of women about their bodies).

Another term used in the book is dissociation. The book doesn't offer a simple explanation, and finding one is not easy, but from the internet the simplest explanation I found was that it ranges in severity from the very common experience of temporarily daydreaming to a much more extreme reaction to some trauma where the person basically "buries" the memory as deeply as possible.

Just because the person doesn't consciously recall the incident, though, doesn't mean it won't affect the person, because such buried memories can still have an effect on the person's body and their reactions to things happening around them.

The reason I pointed this out is that the author notes that people having dissociation might respond to closeness of someone with "...panic, rage, and anxiety, and may use self-destructive behavior to create distance and a sense of protection." (I tend to call things like this having overly-effective defense mechanisms.)

The book also goes into various forms of treatment for self-injurers and has a list of resources people can

turn to in trying to deal with self-injurers.

This, then, is a really good book to help a person understand SIV. It isn't filled with meaningless psychobabble. It does have a lot of personal experiences in it, and it presents possible causes of SIV and offers a variety of possible treatments for it.

(All comments about the introduction are mine alone.)

Now, normally I would make a remark about the introduction first, if I even wrote any comments about it at all. In this case, though, I am saving that part for last. The introduction to the book, on the other hand, was written by a woman who is a doctor and had written her own book on the topic. The introduction, by the way, is, in my opinion, the weakest part of the entire book and should really have been left out.

The writer of the introduction brings up a major Christian religious issue- the crucifixion of Jesus, and in a way ties it into the topic. This is a totally inappropriate comparison. There is a massive difference between cutting to try and deal with emotional pain and allowing oneself to be cut by others for a spiritual purpose. There is virtually no relationship at all between the two.

The second major turn-off for me as far as the introduction goes was the writer's joining of trans-sexualism with psychosis, acute alcoholic and drug intoxications. Gender Identify Disorder (which is the proper term) is not a psychosis. It is not a form of intoxication. It is something totally different and by lumping that with the things she does it seems that the writer is broadcasting her own innate prejudice against those with Gender Identity Disorder.

Then she tends to brag about a book she wrote which again is a turn-off for me. The purpose of this book is to try to help people who are involved with Self-Inflicted Violence, not try to brag about something you've written.

Fortunately, the introduction is short and the types of unacceptable reasons in the introduction are not seen anywhere else in the book.

Elisse says

Looking to learn about the issue of cutting amongst adolescents for the work I do, I looked to this book. It takes a very psychoanalytic approach to the problem, describing cutters issues in terms of family dynamics and interpersonal experience. I just wonder to what extent this issue, like many other mental health issues, has a biological component. I didn't finish the book because it felt like I was going far down a path that I wasn't sure was the current model used by mental health practitioners.

?Michelle? says

Erano anni che volevo leggere questo libro e quindi avevo molte aspettative riguardanti quello che poteva raccontare. A dire il vero, pensavo che fosse la storia di una ragazza o un'autobiografia; non mi immaginavo certo di leggere quasi un testo medico.

La prefazione di Armando Favazza è la miglior prefazione che io abbia mai letto in qualsiasi libro. Spiega

alla perfezione il suo lavoro e molti aspetti del libro che si sta per leggere, senza però spiegarlo, e poi racconta anche della mente brillante di Marilee Strong, che si andrà a conoscere dopo poche pagine. Il libro in sé, poi, lo si può giudicare sia noioso che interessante, sia macabro che brillante, sia un'opera da ripudiare che una da far conoscere al mondo intero. Anche se penso che, parlando dell'Italia, le nostre case editrici hanno deciso di ripudiarla non stampandola più, visto che non ci sono edizioni disponibili da nessuna parte se non in biblioteca – e sono le uniche che sono mai uscite. È stato proprio questo a darmi più fastidio di tutto, e quindi avevo già rinunciato in partenza a leggerlo. Anche perché pensavo che, a causa del tema trattato, fosse meglio leggerlo in inverno – anche se non so perché. Tornando al libro, do pienamente ragione ad Armando Favazza quando dice: “*Un Urlo rosso sangue* dovrebbe essere una lettura obbligatoria per le vittime dell’automutilazione, per le loro famiglie e per chiunque sia interessato all’argomento.” Se solo potessi, butterei il libro in faccia a mia madre e gli direi: “Leggi questo, così capisci cosa provo!”

I cenni di medicina/psichiatria si alternano magnificamente alle testimonianze di varie persone o pazienti, inoltre si parla in modo molto ampio di quanto questo disturbo sia associato ai disturbi del comportamento alimentare (DCA). Quando si parla in modo generico della realtà che caratterizza questo disturbo – di cui si parla troppo poco nel mondo -, si spazia dal motivo per cui dà così tanto sollievo tagliarsi al fatto che questi atti si possono trovare in tutte le tribù antiche, dal fatto che tatuaggi e piercing possono essere considerati atti di automutilazioni al coinvolgimento dei disturbi alimentari in quasi tutti gli autolesionisti, per finire con i programmi che posso aiutare maggiormente ragazzi e ragazze, uomini e donne – siti, forum, terapie. Le testimonianze sono poi sia strazianti che brillanti poiché mentre le leggevo pensavo: “Anch’io mi sento così! Queste sono le mie esatte parole!” Insomma, è come se tutte le persone legate da questo disturbo passino le stesse fasi in momenti diversi della propria vita e in luoghi diversi. Proprio per questo penso che chiunque dovrebbe leggerlo. Da un lato mi ha infatti aiutato a comprendere di più le mie emozioni, i motivi per cui anch’io faccio parte di questa comunità così grande e, soprattutto, il fatto che c’è una via d’uscita, che con degli obiettivi anch’io posso smettere, riuscendo anche a fare amicizia con persone come me; dall’altro mi ha fatto capire quanto io abbia bisogno di essere “malata”, di avere delle attenzioni che probabilmente non avrò mai e che, per nessuna ragione al mondo però, voglio uscire ed entrare dagli ospedali psichiatrici come molte delle persone citate nel libro.

In poche parole, questo libro è un pilastro della letteratura psichiatrica/psicologica quanto narrativa. In confronto, tutti i libri che ho letto sui disturbi alimentari non erano niente.

Kamalia Ramlan says

Kalau kau kenal sesiapa yang mencederakan dirinya sendiri, bukanlah bermakna mereka mahu menamatkan nyawa semata-mata. Kesakitan akibat mencederakan diri sendiri sebenarnya sebagai satu cara memberitahu yang mereka masih wujud. Penderaan fizikal, seksual, mental dan emosi yang ekstrim menjadikan mereka membenci diri mereka sendiri.

Sebuah naskhah yang membuka mata aku tentang 'self-mutilation'. Membaca kisah mangsa-mangsa yang terpaksa hidup dalam keadaan 'kesakitan' yang ekstrim benar-benar tak terbayangkan.

Vanessa says

As someone who has struggled with self-harm since the age of 11 (I'm just turned 25 three weeks ago), I found this book very intriguing. While there are some definite flaws, at least based on my own personal experiences, I would still recommend it to people trying to get into the mindset of someone who self-harms.

While it can be frustrating that it doesn't accurately describe everything, you're never going to find a book that does that 100%. Self-harm begins and is done for such personal reasons that not one person will be able to write a book that another can relate to completely. The treatment center I was at recommended this book to my parents as a way to open the lines of communication. It is definitely worth reading and very insightful for what it is.

Kirsten says

This is an interesting but ultimately flawed look at the phenomenon of self-mutilation as it relates to mental illness. Self-mutilation can take many forms, but the most common seem to be self-inflicted cutting and burning. It's not undertaken with an intent to commit suicide; instead, many people who cut or otherwise injure themselves believe it is one of the things that prevents them from committing suicide.

There aren't that many books for the layperson on this issue, despite increased exposure in the media. This book, by a journalist, pretty much falls under the "good start" category. My biggest problem with it is that at the outset, Strong mentions that the majority of people who self-injure are women who have been sexually abused, but that a sizable minority don't fit that category. She then proceeds to completely ignore self-injury in people who have NOT been sexually abused for the rest of the book. Almost all of the theories she discusses involve PTSD and dissociative disorder brought on by sexual trauma, and she seems to have disregarded any case history that did not fit this paradigm. This ended up frustrating me a lot, and also made me wonder what other inconvenient theories and case histories she'd disregarded in favor of a tidier narrative.

Allen Turley says

I read this book because i wanted to try to wrap my head and heart around cutting. It was completely beyond my comprehension as to why someone would self-mutilate. It definitely helped. I am not as near afraid of helping people with this struggle. This is a secular book that offers no hope. Jesus is the one who truly offers love and healing.

Rebecca McNutt says

I don't know about this book... it was certainly interesting, but it also isn't the first to go with this topic - and as usual, it goes to the extreme and makes it seem like there's an epidemic. Did an alarmist write this?

The Rainbow Zebra says

In my life, I have self-harmed.

I've had this book for a long while. I would read bits of it, but when you're in the midst of crisis, sometimes just reading about it can trigger episodes. But since it's been a long time since I've SH, I was able to finish it.

This book is a vital resource for anyone who self-harms, treats those with SH, guidance counselors, friends and family. It's important to note that those who self harm aren't typically suicidal (at least not in the beginning). And while people usually associate SH w/ teen girls, anyone can be a victim of SH.

My only concern about this book was a section on piercing and tattooing. While I think there is a line that can be crossed, I felt the author erred on the side of caution. I have a tattoo and one piercing. I love them, plan on getting more, and don't feel like it is the same as when I would self-harm. Maybe it's connected to issues, but I'm proud of them, I think they are beautiful.

In any case, I highly recommend this book.

Jennifer Day says

A friend made me read this at the time in my life where I still found the most relief in making myself bleed and creating new scars. *A Bright Red Scream* is a wonderful book that really did help me. It sheds a lot of light on the reasoning of cutters themselves and also on the underlying issues that can cause this behavior to manifest itself. I recommend it to both current and former cutters as I think it has the possibility to help you understand yourself. There is a lot of good information in this book as well as some personal stories. It's another book that I truly hope will bring this awful and dangerous behavior out of the hidden places of long sleeves, pants and little "accidents" and that will make people realize this is a REAL problem, not something to make fun of or something that people only do to get attention.

Sumayyah says

I had so many problems with this book that I don't know where to begin. I simply hope that, in the future, there is more inclusion of people of color and people who are well into adulthood and still struggling with cutting/self-injuring.

Cari says

A good start with a lot of insight into the chronically misunderstood behavior of self-injury. Unfortunately, Marilee Strong focuses almost completely on the percentage who cut because of severe childhood trauma and abuse, effectively ignoring the significant percentage (between 40% and 50%, depending on the study) who experienced no neglect, no physical or sexual abuse, or any other similar circumstances at any point in their lives. For me, this detracted heavily from the book, as it was so one-sided. I guess I feel the author either opted for the "sensational" stories or simply took the easy way out. It's much harder to pinpoint why someone who had suffered no neglect or abuse in their childhood would start cutting themselves in their adolescence or even adulthood, and frankly, that's what I was looking for in a study on self-harm.

Despite that, I would have rated the book a bit higher, except some (though by no means "all" or even "a lot") of the information contained is outdated. Not the author's fault - the information was all current when *A Bright Red Scream* was first written. But research into self-harm and associated illnesses has been on the fast track the last few years. A lot of cutting edge studies have been done, and the passage of a decade has added a lot of new information. Especially when Strong discusses borderline personality disorder (one diagnostic

criteria of which is self-injury), the gains made over the last ten years have left that section lacking. She treats it with despair, "borderlines can't be fixed," and yet new research and treatment methods have proven otherwise in recent years. Perhaps a version with an updated introduction to bring the reader up to speed with years' worth of work and research gains would be beneficial.

Beyond all that, this book contains a quote that I thought beautiful and devastating: "For most people, tears, not blood, are the language of the body."
