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How Do YOU Cope?

Psalms 42:8: (NASB) *The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; and His song will be with me in the night, a prayer to the God of my life.*

**Special Guest: Suzanne (Sue) Doctor, Licensed Professional Counselor
CADC (Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor)**

We all have experiences in our lives that hurt. Sometimes the pain in our lives can feel like a flood - an overwhelming tide that is sweeping us away, and we feel all alone. So, we try to cope. We try to find something to hold onto or something to do that takes our minds away from the pain of our lives. For some of us, especially for teenagers, what they find to mask their heartache is physical pain they can control and inflict upon themselves. As we invest our time today in discussing positive and negative ways to cope, we dedicate our conversation to those who find themselves coping through self-injury. Our message is simple - there is hope and it can be found!

Sue has a Master's Degree in clinical psychology and is qualified to do therapy. She works with teenagers and adults. Throughout this Rewind, we will excerpt her thoughts in purple-colored font.

The following points are excerpted from the book, "Stopping the Pain," by Lawrence E. Shapiro, PhD.

What Do You Know About People Who Self-Injure? True or False?

1. Only a few very sick people self-injure. FALSE. *Approximately one percent of the population has, at one time or another, used self-inflicted physical injury as a means of coping with an overwhelming situation or feeling.*

2. Teens who hurt themselves are trying to commit suicide, but they don't have the nerve. FALSE. *While some teens who self-injure are also suicidal and think often about death, most teens say that when they self-injure they are not trying to die. Most say that their self-injury is a way of coping with the pain in their lives, and some say that it has become just a habit.*

Self-injury is a coping skill (albeit an unhealthy one), but it affirms that the person wants to live.

3. There are many ways that people self-injure. TRUE. *Self-injury is defined as "intentionally hurting yourself." People find many ways to do this, but most commonly they cut or burn their skin.*

It is a powerful mood-changer. Prior to self-injury is emotional turmoil. When you hurt yourself, all of your focus is on the bleeding and pain, which actually alleviates the emotional distress.

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: The power, wisdom and compassion of our Creator are inescapable!

Psalms 139:7-14: One of the problems is that people think God is there to judge and condemn them. The reality is that God is there to love you and help you through it. God knows the end from the beginning and is helping you. God's compassion can drive us towards wonderful things.

4. People who self-injure are crazy and should be put in hospitals. FALSE. *According to Tracy Alderman, author of "The Scarred Soul," most self-inflicted wounds are not life threatening and may not even require medical attention. Some teens are put in a hospital for a short period because the adults in their lives are afraid and don't know what else to do. Experts in this field have suggested that hospitalization can actually make matters worse. Most teens who hurt themselves are trying to find control in their lives, and involuntary hospitalization makes them feel worse, potentially leading to even more self-injury.*

Many times the parents are not aware of this behavior and do not know how to deal with it once they find out. The child's life is probably not in danger. They should talk to a trusted adult with a sense of how to help them. They are valuable and trying to find a way to get out of their own way! What we have found out about people who self-injure or cut is they are very sensitive. They are emotionally on a hair-trigger. When triggered it is with huge emotion, mostly what we would consider negative - anger, sorrow, pain, misery, and they don't know how to manage it. Cutting marks can be very recognizable and are a red flag that the child needs help. When a kid is self-injuring, they want the feelings to stop. Part of what we adults can do for them is let them know that feelings are neither good nor bad; they are just feelings

that come and go. We do not have to judge ourselves because we feel. We can just say, "Oh! There's that bad feeling again."

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: We can only see as far as we can see!

Psalms 31:9-12: When anyone is in overwhelming distress, we want to come alongside them and not try to fix them but to validate their feelings. We feel better if someone can understand our frustration we are experiencing. When we parents see our kids cutting, we do not want to run out and "fix" them. We want to say, "I can see that you are suffering. What is going on?"

Often, all we can see is the brokenness of our present feeling or experience: **Psalms 34:18:** (NASB) *The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.* The Psalms are filled with sorrow and hope.

The following five stages are markers on the pathway to understanding and recovery according to James O. Prochaska, Professor of Psychology and director of the Cancer Prevention Research Center at the University of Rhode Island.

Stage 1: Precontemplation (Not Ready!): People at this stage do not intend to start the healthy behavior in the near future (within 6 months), and may be unaware of the need to change. People here learn more about healthy behavior; they are encouraged to think about the pros of changing their behavior and to feel emotions about the effects of their negative behavior on others.

In this stage, change isn't really even on your horizon. You are ignoring the problem and going on with your everyday life. The thought comes up but just gets dismissed.

Sometimes we just don't know what we don't know: **Acts 17:22-24**

5. Teens who self-injure are just trying to get attention from their parents. FALSE. *Some teens say that they began to self-injure when they were trying to get attention for their emotional troubles, but when they thought about it, they realized that their behavior was really a silent cry for help and not designed to attract attention. In fact, the majority of teens who hurt themselves go to great lengths to hide their scars and their behaviors from adults, particularly their parents.*

Part of a teen's emotional struggle is becoming a mature adult and finding out who they are. At this point in their life, they are trying to break away from their parents to develop their own identity. Most of the time they don't want their parents' help. That is why it is a very good idea for the parents to get the child professional help.

6. Self-inflicted wounds are a way of being accepted at school. FALSE. *While some teens will form a clique with other teens who self-injure, very few teens say that they harm themselves just to be a part of a group. There is an expression that "misery loves company," and it is more likely that teens who are unhappy find comfort in being around other teens with similar feelings.*

They are seeking validation. When they cut as part of a group behavior, no one is trying to fix each other. They are all hurting and feeling validated for their hurt with their friends. That is really important. A lot of times, people think it is not right to be angry or something similar. God gave us these feelings of anger. Anger in and of itself is not something that is shameful. It is what we do with the anger that can become problematic. Many times teens with these huge emotions are condemning themselves. The first thing they can do is acknowledge they are angry again or hurting again...AND THAT IS OKAY! Putting identifiers on it and learning the process is important, which is why professional help is important. The mature adult comes beside the teen and acknowledges the feelings. "I would feel horrible too in that situation. Your boyfriend has just devastated you." And if you can just talk about the feeling, that can actually calm you down and the teen receives comfort. "It is okay I feel this way; they are validating me." The urge to cut subsides because the pain is diminished. Notice it is when an adult comes *beside* them, walking with them, not confronting them.

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: Confession - the burden of hiding your turmoil outweighs the burden of sharing your turmoil!

We need to feel free to talk to God: **Hebrews 4:15-16**

Stage 2: Contemplation (Getting Ready): At this stage, participants are intending to start the healthy behavior within the next six months. While they are usually now more aware of the pros of changing, their cons are about equal to their pros. This ambivalence about changing can cause them to keep putting off taking action.

In this stage you are thinking, “Hmmm...I do have a problem.” You are not making a plan but are realizing how it impacts your life. “Maybe I should do something about it but it will be really hard.” You are ambivalent. These stages of change apply to any kind of change in our lives. Do you want to go to college? You have to think about the cost of time and money. Is that change worth it?

We need to feel free to talk to others whom we trust: Galatians 6:2: (NASB) *Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.* In other words, let me help you carry the weight of this circumstance. When you encounter people who are in pain, acknowledge their pain. Help them to carry that burden. Enter in with them. It diminishes their urge to self-harm.

7. Only teens who have other serious psychological problems will harm themselves. False. *While it is true that some teens who self-injure do have other very serious problems which they may have had for many years, this is certainly not the case with everyone.*

Teenage years are years of experimentation and exploration.

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: Fellowship - the always important act of letting others into your life and being a part of their life!

We have spiritual fellowship with Jesus: Matthew 11:28-30: For both teenagers and adults in emotional turmoil, it can help to sit down and write a letter to Jesus. Pour out your heart onto that piece of paper. Curiously enough, writing taps a different part of your brain. Sometimes when we write we can get things out on paper and did not even know that was in our hearts. Writing to Jesus and telling him all of your problems can help you to understand what is going on. **Those who are strong should support those who are weaker in fellowship:** Romans 15:1,5-7: Not all people are strong at all things.

Stage 3: Preparation (Ready!): People at this stage are ready to start taking action within the next 30 days. They take small steps that they believe can help them make the healthy behavior a part of their lives. For example, they tell their friends and family that they want to change their behavior.

They are also making lists at this stage of things they can do instead of self-injury. They aren’t practicing those things yet, but instead of hating their body, they can take a bubble bath and put lotion on their body. Maybe they can paint their toenails. Maybe they can do something nice for themselves. You start making different plans of different ways to cope. In other words, here are ways to cope that honor my body rather than destroy it. When people hurt themselves, they tend to also judge themselves: I’m a bad person. I deserve this. God hates me because I’m doing this. But God forgives you and understands your turmoil. God is trying to help you. God is not judging you. Romans 8:1: *Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* We can go to God freely through our Savior. It takes away the burden of the judgment and opens the door to compassion. So we are not afraid. Instead of saying, “I’m a bad person,” we can say, “I have a problem. God can help me with this problem and will love me through this problem *through* other people.” Teenagers will look to their parents as how to be a mature adult. The parents’ behavior in dealing with them is extremely important. **Everyone is important!** 1 Corinthians 12:18-25: The body cannot function properly without you. We really need each other. In a family, children play a vital role. We can’t overlook their importance and let them be overwhelmed in the struggles of their lives.

8. If your wounds are superficial, your self-injury may be just a phase. False. *The severity of self-injury has very little to do with the feelings you might have. People have different tolerances to pain and they have different ways to hurt themselves. When teens hurt themselves, it should be taken seriously.*

What about when people use self-injury as a way to punish themselves because of guilt? How do you “validate” guilt? Try to repeat the content of what they are saying. “So, you are cutting yourself because you didn’t do your homework.” “Wow, I can hear that you really feel that you let your parents down; you are going to get an F, but it is okay.” You validate the feeling of guilt without going into the guilt itself. Emotional turmoil is like a balloon ready to pop. By talking to people the air goes out of the balloon and pretty soon it shrivels up. As a trusted adult, be willing to listen and be willing to be trusted! You are not judgmental; you are there as a support. Move towards: “This is how I’m feeling. Feelings are neither good nor bad. God made me with feelings. Feelings are like flags. Oh! I’m angry? Maybe somebody

crossed my boundaries. And then you can start looking for a solution. How do I protect myself better?”

Stage 4: Action: People at this stage have changed their behavior within the last 6 months and need to work hard to keep moving ahead. These participants need to learn how to strengthen their commitments to change and to fight urges to slip back.

At this stage they have tried out some of their plans: When I want to cut, what should I do? They can write a letter to Jesus. They can call a good friend who will just listen. They can write a letter to their therapist and bring it to the next session. They can go for a long walk or run at night. Play the guitar. Experiment with what reduces the feelings. Always recognize it is just a feeling. Feelings come and feelings go. We want our actions to be based on principles and thought; we don’t want to act on impulses. We want to feel the feelings and then when the feelings are reduced, then we try to act. We want to support them so they know they are capable of acting differently.

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: Action - movement is a true sign of active life!

James 2:14-20: We profess to have faith, but unless we are doing something based on that realization then our faith is empty.

Yes, but you don’t want to push a person too quickly to that position. If they are not ready, if they are afraid to act, if they feel like they have failed, then they think, “I am a failure,” because it is too soon. Even the Apostle Paul failed. **Romans 7:15:** *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.* Everybody messes up...and that’s okay! People can go back and forth between stages. Parents with a troubled teenager need to remember this and be patient. Stand beside them and help them grow through it. When it comes to control, I think God is in control. What I do is I surrender my control to God. That makes my life easier. When I’m overwhelmed with something, I pray, “I can’t do it, Lord. Please, You take over.” Sometimes when we look at the idea of surrender, we don’t take any action and just let things happen. What do you mean, “surrender?” We look for answers to prayer. Surrender is prayer. We surrender to His will. “Help me to see what You want me to do,” and we wait for His direction. Surrender is not without activity; it is giving control to following God’s guidance. I can’t. God can. Let Him.

9. Girls and boys typically self-injure in different ways. TRUE. *While it is true that girls more commonly fall into a pattern of self-injury, there are many boys who do this, too. Some people think that girls who self-injure are just found out more often than boys. Others think that boys are more indirect in seeking self-injury and are more likely to hurt themselves through high-risk behaviors, such as extreme sports.*

FOUNDATIONAL SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLE: Vision - to see with clarity is to be able to write the vision’s picture down with detail and to walk the vision’s path with conviction!

Stage 5: Maintenance: People at this stage changed their behavior more than six months ago. It is important for people in this stage to be aware of situations that may tempt them to slip back into doing the unhealthy behavior—particularly stressful situations. It is recommended that people in this stage seek support from and talk with people whom they trust, spend time with people who behave in healthy ways, and remember to engage in healthy activities to cope with stress instead of relying on unhealthy behavior.

By this stage you have a pretty good understanding of your triggers and ways to manage those triggers. You have developed healthier coping skills and want to make new friends. We recommend you get involved in sports or studies. Dream about your future! Those who self-injure aren’t dreamers. They don’t dream about getting married or having a car; they are just stuck in their agony. So, you want to start thinking about all the beautiful things life has in store for you. It is an exciting time. Move beyond having the negative feelings and start looking at all the wonderful possibilities. **Proverbs 3:3-8** A caller suggests: **Philippians 4:13:** *I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me.*

Each of us has had agony in our lives. When we work through it with God and look for His leadings, at the end of that experience, we come out as better people. I would not exchange my life for anything. I would not say to the Lord, “No, I don’t want that trial.” I am so thankful for my hard experiences because they have changed me. They have taught me compassion and love and wisdom. They have made me more Christ-like. Embrace the



experiences because on the other side of the trial, you can be transformed! To the teenager, the transition is coping in a positive way.

Never ever forget God's merciful love: Matthew 12:20-21: (NASB) ²⁰*A battered reed He will not break off, And a smoldering wick He will not put out, Until He leads justice to victory.* ²¹*And in His name the Gentiles will hope.* When you are in agony, God is always with you. He will never leave you or forsake you...even if you do something terribly wrong. He is still there, loving you. So pray to Him. Talk to Him. Ask Him to help you. Many times God will help us through someone else, so find a good, mature adult who you can share your burdens with. Then start looking for ways to manage your agony and the Lord will never give up on you. Not ever.

All of us go through agony and difficulty in our lives. Sometimes when we are a teenager, we don't know how to cope. We find ways that end up being injurious but it is all we know. But there are those who will walk beside you, will listen and be patient so you can be shown there is hope - a bigger and better way to be able to cope with the difficulties of life.

*So, how do YOU cope?
For Jonathan and Rick (and Kathy!) and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!*