

# Self-Mutilators Anonymous

## Crisis Resources

- Suicide prevention lifeline 24/7: **Call 1-800-273-TALK(8255)**
- Samaritans suicide prevention lifeline 24/7: **Call 212-673-3000**
- Lifenet 24/7: **Call 1-800-NYC-WELL or Text WELL to 65173**

## Meeting Format

1. Host reads the Meeting Format (Preamble, Opening Statement, Layers to Discovery (**subject line only**), and Tools of Recovery)
2. Qualifications (your life journey with self-mutilation)  
Those who wish to qualify at a meeting must make arrangements in advance. Please email [sma@selfmutilatorsanonymous.org](mailto:sma@selfmutilatorsanonymous.org) if interested.
3. Three deep breaths and one-five minutes (Host decides duration and keeps track of time) of guided meditation
4. Open sharing (being as honest as you can about what's frightening you, intimidating you, making you feel depressed, angry, insecure, or causing you to crave and/or mutilate yourself, progress, etc. Another option is to discuss the layer you are working on or anything else in the literature that speaks to you.)
5. Donations (overhead fees, etc.)
6. Affirmations (read 1-3 from the literature or make up your own)
7. Host reads the Closing Statement
8. Serenity Prayer
9. Business Announcements

## Preamble

Self-Mutilators Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other, that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from physical self-mutilation. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop mutilating oneself physically. There are no dues or fees for SMA membership. We are self-supporting through our own contributions. SMA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization, or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stop mutilating ourselves and to help others to recover from self-mutilation.

## Opening Statement

We believe that we are as sick as our secrets and that self-disclosure and honesty with others is the key to recovery. There is no cross-talk in meetings, and no advice is given. We encourage members to identify what they do to self-mutilate, but we ask that you do not elaborate about specific episodes of self-mutilation or call specific attention to scars or wounds. The moderator may intervene if a share becomes graphic or continues too

long. Please know, if you are asked to wrap up a share, that there is no judgment in this and no criticism; the moderator is simply trying to ensure that we do not inadvertently trigger self-mutilation in each other or come to the end of the meeting without everyone who wishes to speak having had a chance to do so. All of us have struggled at times with feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, and despair over our behaviors, and we know that sometimes these feelings can become truly unmanageable. You alone can judge if you need help of a kind that goes beyond what a peer support group can give. SMA is not a professional health care service and cannot intervene in emergencies or provide medical care. If you are feeling suicidal at any time, or if your self-mutilating behaviors are or risk becoming life-threatening, please reach out to a professional and/or call a suicide prevention hotline (see Crisis Resources).

### **Introduction to the Layers to Discovery**

Self-mutilation is complex, dynamic, and multi-layered. Self-mutilation has much to do with inner-child work, which is why we believe that the layers listed below help us understand and discover the “why” of our self-mutilation and how to regain healthy coping mechanisms, control, and freedom.

There is no quick fix or perfectionism in layer work. Recovery is ever-changing and evolving. Layer work is the beginning of walking into your freedom of the person you are meant to be.

Recovery isn't linear and neither are the Layers to Discovery. These layers coexist and can be done in any order and repeated. They are meant to help you awaken and realize where you are in the layer process. Think about the present moment in your journey. Your goal is not to get out, but to get clarity.

We believe that we are always beginners in layer work. We never “graduate” or finish, and it is always a learning process. The process of recovery includes returning as often as necessary to behaviors and thought patterns that lead to your mental freedom.

In each layer, you will find guiding questions. It may help to write down your answers to these questions in a journal to track your layer work and see the changes in your thinking over time.

# **Layers to Discovery**

## **Layer One: Realizing What Keeps Us From Knowing Ourselves**

### **Identify your self-hatred.**

Where do feelings of worthlessness come from?

- Be aware of negative self-talk and write it down.
- Think about how you self-talk vs. how you talk around others, and how people talk around you.

### **Recognize when you have a false mask on and when you're able to take it off.**

Who do you wear a false mask around?

- Realize when you don't have a mask on (when you are authentically yourself).

Do you feel authentically yourself when you are self-mutilating?

- Pick up on the clues in your body when you are wearing or not wearing a mask.

When you feel disconnected from your body, are you wearing a mask?

- Figure out how you feel in your body to identify your authentic self.
- Think about what your self-mutilating behavior tells you. It may tell you something important, but it is not a solution.

Where are your thoughts during the act of self-mutilation?

- Are you replaying the events of the day, almost like a movie, to realize what was actually bothering you?
- Are you processing anger or a triggering moment?
- Are you judging yourself?
- Are you using "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts"?
- Are you neutralizing self-blame?
- Is the behavior an attempt to do something constructive and adaptive (although maladaptive)?
- Does the behavior help you contain feelings?
- Does the behavior help you let feelings out?
- Is the behavior a punishment?

## **Layer Two: Breaking Up With Guilt**

### **Start an open dialogue with self. ("The Breakup/Renogiation")**

What does it mean for you to be without the behavior?

- Think of the behavior and the results of the behavior. Look at both in new ways.

What would your life feel like without the behavior?

- What does the behavior give you?
- Do you feel that it gives you control?
- What is a healthier way you could achieve that outcome?
- Consider what letting go of the behavior would mean for you.

How can you transform guilt into action?

- Turn guilt into gratitude.

**Write down all the judgements you have of yourself.**

What do you consider to be your “failures”?

- Recognize your inward hate.

**Identify when you feel guilty.**

What are you doing when feelings of guilt come up?

- Write down what you feel guilty about.
- Allow the guilty voice to come.
- Forgive yourself and move on.
- Realize that thoughts are just thoughts, not facts or true stories.
- If there is something in the thoughts that you need (insight), acknowledge it and allow it to come back in a healthy manner, rather than a destructive one.
- Allow the thoughts to leave your mind like a dream.

**Discover and let go of your rules/restrictions.**

For what behaviors or circumstances do you have rules/restrictions?

- Write down 1-3 of your rules/restrictions.
- Are they rules/restrictions about your self-mutilating behavior?
- Are they rules/restrictions to control your own behavior and reign yourself in?
- Identify that these rules/restrictions are fear-based and were created for emotional safety.

What commonalities do your rules/restrictions have?

- Consider the origin of where your rules/restrictions came from and how they served you.
- Identify how you box yourself in.

## **Layer Three: Becoming Our Authentic Selves**

**Become your own loving authority figure.**

What does a loving authority figure do? What does a loving authority figure not do?

- Focus on praise instead of punishment.
- Don't engage in self-judgement or negative self-talk.
- Be encouraging. Know that failure is learning.

**Start setting boundaries.**

What are healthy boundaries?

- Know that it is ok to say no.
- Organize a sense of self around your own opinions rather than those of others.

**Reflect on what you want for yourself.**

What has fear of rejection and judgement from others kept you from doing?

- Write down things you haven't gone for.
- Write down things you have gone for.

- Write down compliments you give yourself (no matter how small they may seem).

### **Discover what you like to do.**

What activities do you enjoy?

- Who do you like to be around?
- Write down things you like about yourself.
- Consider trying new things.

## **Layer Four: Forging A Connection With Self And Others**

### **Write an apology letter to yourself.**

How have you harmed yourself by self-mutilating?

- 12 step programs typically include writing amends to others, but as self-mutilators, we consider it an important part in our process to acknowledge the harm we have done to ourselves. Many of us have consciously chosen to damage ourselves rather than expressing ourselves and risking disappointing others. To us, the mildest form of disapproval from others would feel catastrophic, and we go to great lengths to avoid it.

### **Connect with your spiritual self.**

Many of our members are spiritual or agnostic and have not gravitated to any organized religion, and some have had painful experiences with the idea of a higher power. Therefore, we leave your spirituality up to your own discovery.

### **Continue to carry the message.**

## **Tools of Recovery**

- Make attendance at meetings your first priority.
- Disclose what you do to mutilate and identify it as an addiction.
- Study SMA literature.
- Be aware of your triggers.
- Exercise regularly to relieve stress.
- Talk to another self-mutilator to short-circuit the behavior.
- Draw or write down your feelings; don't take them out on yourself.
- Break out of your routine.
- Find a constructive outlet for your anger.
- Find a creative use for your free time.
- Write your own recovery plan.
- Write a gratitude list.
- Use these tools to abstain from secondary mutilation behaviors too.

## **Affirmations**

We use affirmations to help set boundaries and establish a framework to create the vision of what we are working towards.

- I let my body heal.
- I stay conscious of my feelings and write them down.
- I have the right to be abstinent, no matter what.
- I applaud my willingness.
- I'm free to spend my time as I choose.
- My body is beautiful; I want to take care of it.
- I deserve to come into the inheritance of my own beauty.
- Life is safe.
- I accept myself exactly how and who I am today.
- I am willing to become increasingly more gentle and loving to myself.
- I joyfully say, "No."
- I have survived my childhood.
- I deserve to be the person I am.
- My humor is a sign of my recovery.
- If at first I don't succeed, I lower my expectations.
- I have nothing to apologize for.
- As the days go on I will learn to hate myself less and less. I got this. I can do this.
- My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I wear my name proudly today.
- I am smart, talented, and good enough.
- Just for today, I will protect my body from all forms of self-mutilation.
- My soul is changed. My spirit is lifted.
- I have discovered the beauty of the present moment.
- Today I am grateful for the freedom from bondage of self-mutilation tendencies.
- By working through the layers, I have peace within myself today.
- I am strong.
- I will turn my pain into power.
- The fight is worthwhile.

## **Closing Statement**

The opinions expressed here were strictly those of the person who gave them. Take what you liked and leave the rest. Whatever your problems, there are those among us who have had them too. If you try to keep an open mind, you will find help. You will come to realize that there is no situation too difficult to be bettered and no unhappiness too great to be lessened. The things you heard here were spoken in confidence and should be treated as confidential. Talk to each other, reason things out with someone else, but let there be no gossip or criticism of one another. Instead, let the understanding, love, and peace of the program grow in you one day at a time. Will all who care to, join in the closing serenity prayer?

## **Serenity Prayer**

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Keep coming back. It works if you work it. So work it, you're worth it.

## **Who We Are**

We are a group of people who have found emotional and physical release in cutting, scratching, burning, picking, hair-pulling, cuticle-shredding, and other behaviors that cause injury to ourselves. We engage in these behaviors because we crave the release they bring and have not yet learned the skills to process our emotional experiences in a more constructive way. There is no typical self-mutilator, but many of us are self-described "people pleasers" with a tendency to act one way and feel another. We generally blame ourselves for our problems and find it difficult to forgive ourselves for our scars. Although the addiction that we identify is not the dependence on substances that members of other fellowships seek out, we suspect that there are neurological and chemical phenomena at play when we self-soothe by injuring ourselves at times of intense emotional distress. As we tell our stories and start to heal, many of us go through a phase of heightened anxiety, feeling the loss of our self-injurious habits as the loss of a relationship with some "other." There is great relief in sharing these reactions to healing, and those of us who have been "free" for a sustained period enjoy a sense of identity that is stable and healthy. Listening to those who have achieved real liberation describe the peace they have found in the program inspires us to continue on the difficult road to recovery.

## **Who We Are Not**

We do not self-injure because we are trying to end our lives. We do not get sexual satisfaction out of self-injury or consider self-injury as an art form. Although we tend to come from families and environments in which there are certain kinds of problems, and although we believe that recognizing these early patterns is an important part of our recovery, we are not focused on blaming others. We believe that each of us has a choice and can, with help, find freedom from physical self-mutilation and learn alternative ways to deal with interpersonal pain.

## **Myths**

- We are trying to kill ourselves.
- We are attention-seeking.
- We all dress, act, and look the same.
- We are outcasts in society.
- We are dangerous to others.
- We are fragile.
- We are violent.

- All self-mutilators have experienced grave trauma.

## **Do I Physically Self-Mutilate?**

### **Do any of the following questions describe you?**

1. Do you find yourself drawn to any kind of repetitive physical activity that is focused on one or more of your body parts and involves any form of picking, cutting, scratching, biting, burning, hair-pulling, head banging, or other “attacking” behaviors?
2. If yes, does it feel like you can’t resist engaging in the behavior or that, once you start, you are unable to stop yourself?
3. Do you ever feel compelled to engage in the behavior even when a part of you is trying to resist?
4. Does your sense of time ever change when you’re engaging in your behavior so that you are surprised, when you eventually stop, to see how much time has elapsed?
5. Do you consider the behavior a secret and/or something that makes you different from other people?
6. Are there times when you feel you are withdrawing from other people or unwilling/unable to engage in social activities because you’re embarrassed by physical signs (scars, bruises, scabs, etc.) or because the need to engage in the behavior is so intense that you’re unable to focus on something else?
7. Are there things you feel you would have done in your life if you weren’t spending the time engaging in a self-directed physical behavior with no obvious purpose other than the relief you find in it?
8. Do you feel that the behavior you engage in, even if it seems self-destructive, is also calming to you? Does it help you in another way that feels important, for example by making an upsetting situation feel less threatening, or allowing you to focus when you’re feeling scattered, or helping you settle down physically or emotionally when it’s time to sleep?
9. Do you have physical scars or injuries that you feel you cannot explain to people if you’re asked about them?



10. Are shame, anxiety, or other feelings about your behavior a big part of what you think about in your daily life? Do you have a sense that without the behavior, you would lose an important part of your identity, even if you hate what you do?

### **Self-Mutilator Characteristics (adapted and edited from the ACA Laundry List)**

*These are characteristics self-mutilators have identified with. You may not identify with every characteristic listed below (and that is ok).*

- We have become isolated and afraid of people and authority figures.
- We have become approval seekers and have lost our identity in the process.
- We have become addicted to physical pain, darkness, and control.
- We are frightened by angry people and any personal criticism.
- We live life from the viewpoint of victims and are attracted by that trait in our romantic relationships and friendships.
- We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves; this enables us to not look too closely at our own emotions, wants, and needs.
- We feel guilty when we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others.
- We confuse love and pity and tend to “love” people we can “pity” and “rescue.”
- We have “stuffed” our feelings from our traumatic childhoods, life events, etc. and have lost the ability to feel or express our feelings with words and without self-judgement; therefore we rely on physical pain.
- We judge ourselves harshly and have a very low sense of self-esteem.
- We tend to come from dysfunctional families that lack healthy emotional communication and values.
- We engage in self-mutilation as pure reaction, rather than action.

### **SMA Promises (adapted and edited from the ACA Promises)**

1. We will discover our real identities by loving and accepting ourselves.
2. Our self-esteem will increase as we give ourselves permission on a daily basis.
3. Fear of authority figures and the need to “people-please” will leave us.
4. Our ability to share intimacy will grow inside us.
5. As we face ourselves, we will be attracted by strengths and self-acceptance.
6. We will enjoy feeling stable, peaceful, and content.
7. We will learn how to play and have fun in our lives.
8. We will choose to love people who can love and be responsible for themselves.
9. Healthy boundaries and limits will become easier for us to set.
10. Fears of failure and success will leave us as we intuitively make healthier choices.
11. With help from our SMA support group, we will slowly release our negative self-talk.
12. Gradually, with our higher power’s help, we will learn to expect the best and get it.



## **What Recovery Means**

- Finding an identity that is real, not “chameleon-like”
- Liberating ourselves from self-blame, both in connection with our former behaviors and in other aspects of our lives
- Building relationships in which we are truly present
- Not disappearing into our self-injurious behaviors
- Not feeling like we have to choose between other people and the false sense that our self-injury is the most real part of ourselves and the one thing we cannot do without

## **Triggers List**

- Self-disappointment
- Intense emotions that feel uncontrollable
- Rejection
- “I failed you. I should be punished.”
- “I let you down. I failed you and myself.”
- “My emotions are too erratic.”
- “I’m too much for the world and everyone around me.”
- “I’m a failure.”
- “I’m too sensitive.”
- “I feel stupid for going to this extreme (self-mutilation).”

# FAQ Questionnaire

## 1. What's the mission of SMA?

SMA's mission is to provide a safe space (virtual and/or actual) for individuals who engage in physical self-mutilation to come together and share our experience, strength, and hope without judgment or criticism. Together, we deepen our understanding of our behaviors and triggers and, working within the framework described in our literature ("Layers to Discovery"), we help ourselves and each other on our path to freedom. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop mutilating oneself physically.

## 2. Where and when did SMA begin?

Self-Mutilators Anonymous (SMA) was founded in New York City in the summer of 1986.

## 3. What was the inspiration behind setting up this support group?

SMA's founders, one an engineer and the other a marketing executive, discovered their common struggle and began to speak frankly with each other about what they were doing. Although the group started with only these two men, its membership now includes individuals of every age, gender, race and creed. We are LGBTQ+ friendly and welcome members from numerous countries around the world.

## 4. Are there in-person SMA support groups? If so, where do they meet?

All in-person meetings are currently suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-COVID, the only regularly-scheduled meeting was in New York City, in the borough of Manhattan. We hope to resume in-person meetings in Manhattan when it is safe to do so. In the meantime, all meetings are taking place via GoToMeeting.com: <https://global.gotomeeting.com/install/734149493>. Our meeting is password protected. Please email us at [sma@selfmutilatorsanonymous.org](mailto:sma@selfmutilatorsanonymous.org) for the password.

## **5. How frequently does the group meet?**

There are currently two weekly SMA meetings, both via GoToMeeting.com. We have a Thursday meeting at 7:30 p.m. Eastern Time and a Saturday meeting at 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time. Both meetings are one hour in duration.

## **6. What are the eligibility requirements to join or participate?**

A desire to stop physically self-mutilating.

Thursday meetings are closed meetings (only self mutilators may attend). Saturday meetings are open to all i.e. Parents of minors, Medical students, anyone wanting insight into self-mutilation.

## **7. Does SMA charge an attendance fee or membership dues?**

No, SMA does not have any dues or fees. Donations are appreciated. We are self-supporting through our own contributions.

## **8. Who are the clinician collaborators with the SMA group?**

SMA is solely a peer support group. We do not collaborate with clinicians, but we are open to partnerships.

## **9. If I want to be an anonymous participant, does SMA accommodate my privacy needs?**

SMA online meetings are not recorded. SMA takes precautions to make sure no data is stored or recorded during meetings.