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A Book Review on Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: Advances in Research and Practice

Washburn, J. J. (Ed.). (2019). *Nonsuicidal self-injury advances in research and practice*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

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Overview

Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: Advances in Research and Practice, is a book formulated by an assembly of experts who have teamed up to deliver their insight on the complexity of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and where research within this field is heading. This book thoroughly addresses everything from our fundamental understandings of the disorder to our most recent discoveries, as well as where questions remain unanswered.

As a new researcher with hopes of advancing my knowledge regarding NSSI, this book was recommended to me by Dr. Gerald McKinley, an Assistant Professor and Anthropologist in the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, who has had a bounty of experience researching in the field of NSSI and other mental health topics. After reading this book, I feel that my understanding of NSSI has grown immensely, as the book consolidated aspects of NSSI that I had learned elsewhere, and also greatly advanced my knowledge of the many topics I had not previously known of. What I appreciated most about the book was how it highlights the newly considered gaps in the literature. Given that NSSI is a field of research that is still considered novel, there are so many questions yet to be answered, and this book does an excellent job of providing the background information of what we know about NSSI, which segues into the book's remaining questions that now feel as though they are begging to be answered. Therefore, whether you are a student, researcher, or even a clinician looking to advance your knowledge of NSSI, this book will have something for you.

This book is divided into three sections, each consisting of a set of chapters touching on the various topics of NSSI. The first section can be considered an introduction to NSSI, as it introduces the foundational knowledge of NSSI and then begins to stretch into what we know beyond these basics. The second section, titled *Emerging Conceptual and Categorical Issues*, provides insight into just that, and the final section delves into the assessment and treatment of NSSI. Just as the book is organized, I will provide my review of each of these sections individually, with hopes of providing more thorough and meaningful critiques than those that would come from reviewing the book as a whole.

NSSI Basics and Beyond

The first two chapters of Washburn's novel do an excellent job of providing us with an overview of foundational knowledge that researchers have established over the years. This knowledge is provided with clear definitions, and the author makes thorough use of examples to help consolidate these definitions. Additionally, the author creates a flow for the book become apparent within these early chapters, in which concepts are often explained in a timeline-like fashion. It is almost as if the author is unravelling a story of how research regarding the definition of NSSI, its functions, epidemiology, and so on, are all changing into what we know today from the progression of research. This style of writing serves beneficial to the reader as it

not only makes it clear of where the research currently stand in regards to its advancements, but it also clarifies what has already uncovered in the past. This flow also carries over nicely into future chapters as the framework for what gaps remain in the literature are also touched up early in the novel.

Another tool that benefits the reader is how the author puts into perspective the importance of researching NSSI. More specifically, the author tends to link many of these foundational concepts with the forefront of research and/or clinical treatment of NSSI, making these otherwise bland definitions feel more engaging. For example, at one point in chapter one, the author goes on to discuss the comorbidities NSSI has been linked to. Rather than leaving this list as it is, which can be quite dry and hard to remember as a student, the author then goes on to explain the importance of understanding these comorbidities, as researchers are looking to untangle the mechanisms of NSSI to improve diagnosis and treatment. In stressing this importance, it makes the reader interested in the content being put forward, as it gives meaning to these foundational terms as opposed to just being definitions with no context. In providing this context, any reader, whether you are a clinician, researcher, or student hoping to one day be either of the two, you will likely find something that grabs your attention within the frequently explained importance behind concepts, making you want to keep reading and learning more.

Before closing out the first section of the book, the second chapter touches on where research surrounding NSSI has recently expanded, specifically in regards to what makes NSSI unique from other mental disorders and conditions. One aspect that stood out to me in particular was the heterogeneity of NSSI, in that it has significant differences between individuals based on phenomenology, functions, correlates, outcomes, and so on. The author goes on to thoroughly shed light on possible explanations in the literature that I think more researchers need to consider. For example, the importance of adverse childhood experiences, cultural experiences, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, along with various other social factors, are all stated to evidently to play a large role in the heterogeneity of NSSI. The book even goes on to state how it is important to consider the intersectionality of multiple types of diversity that can come from these various social factors. It was refreshing to read this book's statement that more research needs to consider the diversity of people in order to truly understand NSSI's heterogeneity, a gap in literature that extends beyond NSSI and needs to be addressed in other mental health disorders and conditions as well. This is just one example of how this novel's authors' highlight the largest gaps that remain in literature, even those that many researchers may not consider.

Emerging Conceptual and Categorical Issues

The second section of this book addresses the forefronts of research surrounding NSSI, much of which is still up for debate and needing further investigation, which the authors greatly emphasize when necessary. This section is made of five chapters as follows: Pain and Self-Criticism, The Neurobiology of NSSI, Diagnostic Classification of NSSI, NSSI and Compulsive Disorders, and NSSI and Suicidal Self-Injury. Overall, these chapters serve as great introductions to these various aspects of research, as well as touch on concepts, theories, and hypotheses that delve beyond a simple introduction.

With each of these chapters exploring the many research questions that remain regarding NSSI, I frequently found myself questioning so much more about NSSI than I previously would have considered. What are the biological mechanisms behind the pain offset relief hypothesis? What are the key gene-environment interactions that play a role in NSSI? How can we adapt NSSI's diagnostic criteria to be a more dimensional approach that is better suited for clinicians?

These are just a sliver of the bounty of questions that crossed my mind. I can only imagine the questions and ideas would run through the mind of an expert in this field. It is because of this creative mindset that the book will put you in that keeps the reading so engaging, which is most apparent in this section. Not only that, but I could very well see this book drawing in students and new researchers to the field of NSSI because of how well it highlights the abundance of interesting research possibilities and the resulting impacts these possibilities would have on advancing our knowledge of NSSI.

Similar enticement can be said for future and current clinicians that are engaging in research regarding the treatment of NSSI. While the third section of this book is most relevant to clinical practice, the second section frequently relates the importance of these advancements in research back to clinical practice as well. This is most apparent in chapter 5, in which several critiques and concerns about the recently revised Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) criteria for NSSI are brought to light. These critiques and concerns are stated with valid evidence and reasoning to back it up, and thus the author relates back to the significance that having a poor DSM-5 criteria could entail in terms of diagnosing NSSI in a clinical practice. Specifically, the author argues these four reasons on why it's important to have an accurate and clinically useful NSSI diagnostic criteria:

- (1) to establish a definition for clinically significant NSSI that will be consistent for use in diagnosis and research;*
- (2) provide better assessment of NSSI;*
- (3) increase quantity and quality of NSSI research;*
- and (4) promote the development of and research on effective treatments for NSSI.*

This is a prime example of how the author effectively relates back to treatment as a means of expressing the importance of the research that needs to be done going forward. As a future clinician myself, this importance persuades me to continue and even expand upon my involvement in NSSI research, which I anticipate to occur for clinicians reading this as well.

While this novel has proven to be very thorough exploring the known factors that play a known role in NSSI, I could not help but think some factors may have not been considered by the authors. While I may not be aware of all of the ones that other clinicians or researchers might pick up on, one in particular was the biopsychosocial model. For example, the third chapter focuses on two main factors to explain pain endurance in people who engage in NSSI, these being psychological and biological mechanisms. However, through the lens of the biopsychosocial model, it would be crucial to also investigate social mechanisms that could influence pain. While the author discusses some aspects of social influence on the psychological mechanisms, it feels as though there would be more influence from social factors than the book discusses. However, it could have been very much possible that the author had looked into the existing studies that look at social factors, and recognized that they do not play as large a role as one might think, therefore not feeling a need to include them in this chapter. It could also be possible that there is not much literature out there in regards to this topic, but if this was the case, simply stating this in the book would help the reader understand why such an important component to consider feels missing. Nevertheless, I think this should have been something addressed more, as I think many readers, especially those who are involved scientific fields that focus on social influences regularly (i.e. sociologists or anthropologists), may feel as though this aspect of potential mechanisms behind pain endurance in NSSI should have been touched on more.

Assessment and Treatment

The final section of *Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: Advances in Research and Practice* is the longest of the three, as it consists of 6 chapters in total. However, this length comes with good reason, because as the novel suggests, the assessment and treatment of NSSI can become quite complex. The chapters for Assessment and Treatment are as follows: Comprehensive Assessment of NSSI, Emotion Regulation Group Therapy for NSSI, Atypical, Severe Self-Injury, Addressing and Responding to NSSI in the School Context, Toward an Understanding of Online Self-Injury Activity, and Prevention of NSSI. As one can infer just from the titles of these chapters, this section goes beyond simply explaining the current assessment and treatment frameworks set out for clinicians.

The novel even goes as far to state that “no single measure, interview, or assessment framework is sufficient for the clinical assessment of NSSI. Therefore, rather than provide details of specific assessment measures, we instead review the critical variables and constructs essential to a comprehensive NSSI assessment”. Therefore, while the most up-to-date and effective clinical assessment tools are described, this novel goes beyond by also stressing the important variables and factors that must be considered by clinicians to effectively assess NSSI. This insight is bound to make the reader more knowledgeably aware of how to properly assess NSSI regardless of the assessment tools they use, as they will now understand the importance and context behind it. And in understanding this context, it will then be easier for clinicians to treat patients effectively as they will be able to choose treatment options specific to the context that NSSI assessment scores are implying.

Furthermore, the amount of assessment tools provided is copious, yet not overwhelming. In chapter 8, everything from clinical assessment frameworks for interviews, specific self-report measures, and even cognitive-behavioural tracking techniques, are all provided. While this sounds like a lot, the book’s discussion on these assessment tools serve as introductions to each of them, not going into an excess of detail but also giving the reader a general idea of what each tool assesses. Consequently, this book serves as a fundamental introduction to the various assessment measures of NSSI, proving itself useful to those who need an up-to-date and general understanding of the various measures out there. For those who are looking to learn more about what one of these specific assessment measures entails, then looking elsewhere on literature regarding that specific measure may be more appropriate.

Rather than focusing on the broad range of treatment options available, the authors recognize that currently, most treatments that do exist have not been examined extensively or have limited empirical support in regards to treating NSSI. Hence, this book focuses on one treatment option in particular that has garnered substantial support with recent research; emotion regulation group therapy (ERGT). This may be beneficial to some readers, while a bit of a disappointment for others. On one hand, researchers and clinicians who read the book will obtain an in depth knowledge of ERGT, as well as its adaptations that have been made for adolescence, or for internet-based delivery (ERITA). This is consequently a great introduction to a treatment option that many clinicians will find useful, and several researchers will look to expand upon. However, both the ERITA and ERGT are fairly new, and may not be a treatment option for all patients based on geographical regions, healthcare funding, and patient adherence or effectiveness. Therefore, it would have been useful for the book to also discuss the fundamentals of treatment for NSSI outside the specifics of ERGT such that clinicians can treat NSSI if this option is not feasible. An approach similar to that of chapter 8 discussed earlier, in which rather than simply explaining the assessment measures in depth, providing the foundational variables and concepts required would have also been beneficial here in regards to treating NSSI. It is

important to note however, that these foundations may not be well known given the early stages of research, which could be a possible reason for not discussing them further in the novel.

This section of the book also focuses on various topics of NSSI that were yet to be discussed in earlier chapters, almost as though these points were saved for where they matter most, how to treat them. For instance, chapter 10 provides detailed insight on how to understand what is considered atypical and/or severe self-injury by discussing a hierarchy of risk factors that can be used by clinicians and researchers to assess how severe an individual's NSSI is. The chapter even delves into the functions of atypical NSSI as opposed to the functions of NSSI that the book focused so heavily on in the earlier chapters. Additionally, chapter 11 addresses the social influences and factors that must be considered regarding NSSI, especially in adolescence. An example of this is the books stressed importance of social contagion, which refers to the idea that awareness of NSSI, through peers, media, and/or online, can promote or appear to encourage NSSI, increasing risk for NSSI. The author goes into detail not only about how social contagion can occur, but also how to prevent it when discussing NSSI with a patient, family member, or a student, which is crucial to the profession of not just clinicians, but people working with adolescence and/or children in all aspects. Moreover, chapter 11 is where the book finally undergoes an in depth consideration of cultural influences on NSSI, specifically how cultural differences can result in different attitudes towards NSSI, as well as different natures, extents and expressions of NSSI. Resultingly, this final section will be greatly appreciated by readers, who like me, were anticipating insight into these various aspects of NSSI that were alluded to in earlier chapters, but never discussed thoroughly.

However, in addressing atypical severe self-injury, it feels as though it is only fair for mild and/or subclinical self-injury to be addressed in greater detail as well. With the novel's earlier discussion of how mild or subclinical NSSI is very difficult to diagnose with current DSM-5 diagnostic frameworks, it feels as though clinicians need additional assistance or an alternative means of detecting this form of behaviour. This is especially true given the fact that subclinical NSSI can become worse with time and can be associated with other mental health disorders. Therefore, it would have been equally appreciated to have a similar discussion about assessing subclinical NSSI and preventing it from getting worse, as it may have many differences from clinical NSSI just as atypical severe self-injury does.

The final two chapters of *Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: Advances in Research and Practice* exemplify why it should be considered the most up-to-date novel on NSSI, beyond simply the date it was published. Both chapters effectively showcase our understanding NSSI through a modern lens that incorporates internet and technology into the equation. Chapter 12 provides expertise at the forefront of understanding NSSI activity in an online space, and details the many different directions in which research is needed to fully understand this new but important area of NSSI research. One component that readers will likely appreciate is the included table of various recommended online resources for those engaging in NSSI, which clinicians can recommend to patients, and researchers can include in their studies. Chapter 13 excels at providing an up to date summary of the various prevention models out there, which as the author explains are predominantly tertiary prevention and requires more research on developing primary and secondary prevention. Nonetheless, this is evidently still very insight for clinicians who have patients who engage in NSSI. However, where chapter 13 shines is in the future of these prevention models by being integrated into technology to be more cost-effective and reach out to a broader scope of individuals who engage in NSSI. Thus, the novel ends with these final two

chapters by opening up the readers perspective to where the future of NSSI lies, and how we must now be mindful of internet and technology in both research and clinical practice.

Summary

Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: Advances in Research and Practice serves as an introduction to the fundamentals of NSSI that through the authors' clearly written definitions and examples, are easily understood. Yet at the same time, the novel goes beyond these fundamentals and delves into research topics that are multifaceted and at the forefront of advancing our knowledge of NSSI to a broader scope. The book also reports the current state at which assessment and treatment of NSSI are at by touching on both the various tools that can be used, as well as going into the specifics of models that are anticipated to soon be the staple treatment/prevention options. There are a few limitations, predominantly regarding the lack of including deeper discussions over certain aspects of the literature. However, these are most likely limitations in the field of research surrounding NSSI, rather than the novel itself. Given that NSSI is still considered a newer research field, there is a lack of literature on a few concepts that feel as though they were missed in the book, and I anticipate they would have been discussed had there been more existing literature. All in all, the immense strengths that this book puts forwards in regards to advancing the readers knowledge of NSSI greatly outweighs the few and far between limitations that readers might encounter. It is for this reason that I recommend this novel as a must read for students, researchers, and clinicians involved in NSSI, as all will take away something that is useful for their work within this domain. In sum, this book provides the reader with an up-to-date overview of the literature regarding NSSI through the words of experts in the field, where they deliver insightful opinions on what additional research and clinical trials are needed. In reading this novel, the future of NSSI research and clinical practice has never looked so bright.