



# Non-suicidal self-injury prospectively predicts interpersonal stressful life events and depressive symptoms among adolescent girls



Taylor A. Burke<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jessica L. Hamilton<sup>a</sup>, Lyn Y. Abramson<sup>b</sup>, Lauren B. Alloy<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Temple University, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Wisconsin–Madison, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is the deliberate self-harm of one's tissue, engaged in without lethal intent, and occurs frequently among late adolescents. Although research has indicated that NSSI predicts depression, the potential psychosocial mechanisms through which engagement in NSSI makes one susceptible to future depressive symptoms remain unclear. The present study examined whether NSSI increases the risk of experiencing stressful life events, which, in turn, heightens the risk for subsequent depressive symptoms. Drawn from a sample specifically selected for adolescents at high and low risk for developing bipolar spectrum disorders, a total of 110 late-adolescents (mean age = 18.74, SD = .69; 73% female) were administered measures of lifetime and past year engagement in NSSI and current depressive symptomatology. Approximately 6 months later, they completed a measure of depressive symptoms and a questionnaire and interview assessing life events that occurred over the 6-month interval. Results suggest that the frequency of lifetime and past year NSSI predicted the occurrence of interpersonal stressful life events beyond the effects of initial depressive symptoms, but only for late adolescent girls. Results further suggest that higher levels of interpersonal stressful life events mediated the relationship between NSSI frequency and prospective increases in depressive symptoms among girls.

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## 1. Introduction

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is the deliberate self-harm of one's tissue, engaged in without lethal intent (Nock et al., 2006). Up to 38% of individuals in college samples engage in these behaviors (Gratz et al., 2002; Whitlock et al., 2006). NSSI is one of the strongest predictors of both suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviors (Hamza et al., 2012; Klonsky et al., 2013; Wilcox et al., 2012; Wilkinson et al., 2011). Given these statistics, it is surprising that few studies have explored the potential psychosocial mechanisms through which engagement in NSSI makes one more susceptible to negative psychological states, such as depression, that may lead to suicide-outcomes. In particular, it is possible that NSSI may increase the risk of experiencing stressful life events, which, in turn, heighten the risk for subsequent depression.

Considerable research has documented that stressful life events increase the risk of most forms of psychopathology. In particular, stressful life events are predictive of first onset of major depressive disorder (Kendler et al., 1999), suicidal ideation (Fergusson et al.,

2000; Joiner and Rudd, 1995), and suicidal behaviors (de Wilde et al., 1992; Cohen-Sandler et al., 1982). In addition, several studies indicate that individuals who attempted suicide experienced significantly more stressors in the previous year than control individuals (for a review, see Adams et al. (1994)), particularly stressors that were interpersonal in nature. More recently, this framework has been applied to non-suicidal self-injurious behaviors as well, with research finding that higher rates of stressful life events are associated with greater NSSI (Guerry and Prinstein, 2010; Hankin and Abela, 2011; Liu et al., 2014). Thus, identifying factors that increase the risk of experiencing stressful life events, and specifically interpersonal stressors, is important for programs aimed at better understanding and preventing the development of psychopathology.

Although the relationship between stress and psychopathology is well-documented, recent research has begun to examine the transactional relationships between stress and psychological disorders. The transactional perspective proposes that individuals not only react to their environmental stressors, but also actively select, process, and contribute to their social contexts (Coyne, 1976; Caldwell et al., 2004). Specifically, research and theory have demonstrated that individuals have certain characteristics or behaviors that lead to the experience of more interpersonal stressors (Hammen, 1991). In this sense, although stressors may predict

\* Correspondence to: Department of Psychology, Temple University, Weiss Hall, 1701 North 13th Street, PA 19122, United States. Fax: +1 215 204 5539.

E-mail address: [taylor.burke@temple.edu](mailto:taylor.burke@temple.edu) (T.A. Burke).

NSSI (as has been previously demonstrated; Liu, 2014), NSSI also may contribute to the occurrence of subsequent stressful life events.

In particular, given that NSSI is often reported to be a social communication device (e.g., Nock, 2008), NSSI may specifically contribute to stressful life events that involve interpersonal relationships. Although the majority of self-injurers indicate that they engage in NSSI for intrapersonal reasons, a significant portion of self-injurers endorse interpersonal motives (Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl, 2005; Muehlenkamp et al., 2013; Nixon and Heath, 2008; Nock and Prinstein, 2004; Zetterqvist et al., 2013). For example, among a sample of community adolescents, self-injurers endorsed social-reinforcement motives almost as often as they endorsed automatic-reinforcement motives for NSSI (Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2007). Moreover, although NSSI is often hidden from others, among a sample of over 14,000 college students, 77.4% of self-injurers indicated that at least one other person knew about their NSSI (Whitlock et al., 2011). That others have knowledge about an individuals' self-injury may directly trigger relationship problems (Favazza, 1998; Gratz, 2003). For example, there is ample evidence that NSSI is viewed pejoratively by the general public and often is interpreted as an attention-seeking behavior (Crouch and Wright, 2004; Gratz, 2003), which likely leads NSSI to be a highly stigmatizing behavior (Favazza, 1998; Gratz, 2003). Furthermore, for those who interpret this behavior as attention-seeking (correctly or incorrectly), it is possible that they may react to evidence of NSSI by rejecting or avoiding the self-injurer. On the other hand, for those who interpret this behavior as a sign of serious mental health issues, they may react to NSSI by becoming overly concerned (Klonsky, 2009), resulting in over-coddling or isolating the self-injurer, actions that also may induce stressors in relationships. Consequently, the direct interpersonal sequelae of NSSI might impinge on close relationships with peers or family members or prevent new relationships from forming, thus resulting in an increase of interpersonal stressors. Interestingly, there is some research indicating that NSSI may actually have *positive* interpersonal consequences. For instance, research suggests that some individuals may engage in NSSI implicitly or explicitly to increase caretaking behavior from their social support network, which in turn reinforces NSSI when such social rewards are attained (Nock and Prinstein, 2004). Preliminary research supports this hypothesis, finding that among young adolescents, self-injurers were more likely to exhibit an increase in closeness with fathers over an 11-month follow-up period than those without NSSI (Hilt et al., 2008). Although NSSI may elicit some positive social responses, it also may contribute to negative interpersonal stressors, such as conflicts with peers or family members.

A recent study examining the nuances of interpersonal motives for self-injury suggests that girls may be particularly likely to experience interpersonal stressors as a result of NSSI. The study found that females are more likely to initiate NSSI for "direct social motives" (e.g., "hoping someone would notice"), whereas males are more likely to initiate NSSI for "indirect social motives" (e.g., "being angry at someone"; Muehlenkamp et al., 2013). Using NSSI for direct social motives might influence the occurrence of interpersonal stressors more than using NSSI for indirect social motives, given the impetus underlying the behavior is to explicitly influence interpersonal relationships, which may subsequently strain them.

In addition, preliminary research suggests that engaging in NSSI acts as a risk factor for psychological and interpersonal difficulties among females only (Lundh et al., 2011a, 2011b). In a longitudinal study of community adolescents, psychological problems and depressive symptoms served as risk factors for engagement in NSSI at one-year follow up among both boys and girls. However, NSSI served as a prospective predictor of conduct

problems, emotional problems, depressive symptoms, and peer problems at follow up only among females. This research suggests that engaging in NSSI may impinge on social and emotional adjustment among females to a greater degree than it does among males. Consistent with this hypothesis, research indicates that females with a history of NSSI do not employ adaptive coping strategies, such as seeking social support and problem-solving skills, as often as those who have not engaged in NSSI (Andover et al., 2007). The fact that this relationship does not hold among males provides additional evidence that NSSI may be associated with greater interpersonal deficits more among females than among males. Therefore, it seems possible that among females in particular, engagement in NSSI may not only be associated with interpersonal deficits, but also may actually contribute to interpersonal difficulties.

### 1.1. *The current study*

Given evidence suggesting that NSSI likely has direct and substantial relational consequences, the current study examined whether NSSI contributes to the occurrence of stressful life events. Specifically, the present study examined whether NSSI over one's lifetime and over the past year predicted interpersonal and non-interpersonal stressful life events over a six-month follow up period, and whether this relationship would be stronger among females than males. Further, this study examined whether the occurrence of interpersonal stressors would account for the relationship between NSSI and prospective increases in depressive symptoms, and whether this mediational pathway would be significantly different for girls versus boys.

We hypothesized that NSSI (during one's lifetime and over the past year) would predict an increased number of interpersonal stressful life events, but would not predict an increased number of non-interpersonal stressors. Further, we hypothesized that this increase in interpersonal stressful life events would mediate the relationship between NSSI frequency and prospective depressive symptoms. Given research and theory that girls may be more at risk for depressive symptomatology and interpersonal difficulties following NSSI (Lundh et al., 2011a, 2011b), we hypothesized that these relationships would be true only for late adolescent females, but not males.

The current study examined these questions utilizing a sample specifically selected for adolescents at high and low risk for developing bipolar spectrum disorders (BSDs) based on high versus moderate behavioral approach system (BAS; Gray, 1991) sensitivity. The BAS is a neurobiological system proposed to regulate appetitive motivation, or goal-oriented approach behavior. Although this sample was recruited for the larger study goals of examining BAS sensitivity and the onset of bipolar disorder, an undergraduate sample selected for high and moderate BAS sensitivity is appropriate to examine the present study questions. For one, research suggests that NSSI is more likely to occur and with greater frequency among individuals with higher BAS sensitivity (Cerutti et al., 2012; Jenkins et al., 2013). Further, undergraduate individuals are exposed to significant numbers of academic and interpersonal stressors (Compas et al., 1986), as well as depressive episodes (Alloy et al., 2006). Therefore, our sample is more than adequate to test the present hypotheses.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. *Sample recruitment*

Late adolescent participants (ages 14–19) were drawn from a behavioral high-risk study investigating the differences between

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