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Moral Emotions and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: The Roles of Moral Emotions in Cyclical Self-Harming Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between moral emotions—specifically guilt, shame, and perceived failure—and self-harming behavior, with a particular focus on non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). The research sample consisted of 165 university students of psychology (both full-time and part-time) and law, who completed the Self-Harm Inventory questionnaire. This allowed for an analysis of the frequency and types of self-harm, emotional triggers (i.e., emotional causes of self-harm), and subsequent emotional states. Findings revealed a high prevalence of self-harming behavior, particularly more severe forms occurring with at least moderate frequency. The most commonly reported behaviors included self-critical thoughts, scratching, hitting, cutting, and fasting. The primary emotional triggers were feelings of failure, anger, sadness, and guilt, while the predominant post-harm emotional states were relief, guilt, and sadness. Statistical analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between various variables, including emotional triggers and specific forms of self-harm, as well as between types of self-harm and the emotional responses following the behavior. A strong association between guilt and self-harm – comparable to that of shame – challenges the conventional view of guilt as a corrective or adaptive emotion. Instead, both guilt and shame appear to reinforce a cyclical pattern of self-harm driven by the discrepancy between one's actual and ideal self-image. The findings highlight the need for interventions targeting maladaptive self-evaluation, perfectionism, and emotional regulation.

Keywords: self-injury; emotions; maladaptive strategy; coping; addiction

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