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# Research *at a glance*

## Staff Perspectives on Working with Aboriginal Offenders who Self-Injure: What Works, What Doesn't, and the Role of Culture

**KEY WORDS:** *Aboriginal offenders, interventions, correctional staff, self-injurious behavior, treatment, mental health*

### What it means

Staff who work with Aboriginal offenders who engage in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) recommend that intervening or interventions should focus on establishing positive relationships with offenders and addressing their underlying issues, not simply their self-injury. Culturally-specific interventions should be considered for Aboriginal offenders who have not had success with mainstream treatment.

### What we found

Two interrelated themes were evident in all of the interviews and focus groups: (1) the recommendation that interventions should treat the whole person, not just the NSSI; and (2) the importance of establishing positive therapeutic relationships with the offenders is fundamental to NSSI treatment. Responding in a supportive and direct way to an individual's NSSI was identified as an effective method of intervention that also contributes to the establishment of a positive therapeutic alliance. As one participant noted, "[it is most important that offenders know] somebody cares and that spending that time with somebody and building those relationships has another huge impact". Most participants reported that a team approach is an effective strategy for working with offenders who engage in NSSI.

The differences between Aboriginal and mainstream culture is important to consider when working with Aboriginal offenders. Many Aboriginal offenders have complicated backgrounds that influence their behaviour and their sense of identity that must be taken into consideration. Culturally-based interventions, such as participating in ceremonies and working with Elders, may be particularly helpful for this population. Most approaches that foster supportive and compassionate relationships, however, are likely to be helpful with all offenders who engage in NSSI, and may be particularly important for those who have not had success with mainstream treatment.

### Why we did this study

NSSI (any type of deliberately self-inflicted harm or disfigurement that is undertaken without suicidal intent) is one of the most distressing behaviours that mental health professionals deal with, yet there is limited research regarding how staff can effectively interact with offenders to promote better outcomes. Given the number of Aboriginal offenders in CSC and the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture, more information is needed on how to best serve these offenders and examine what role their culture plays in designing effective interventions.

### What we did

Fourteen staff members working with Aboriginal offenders in CSC correctional institutions and the community participated in focus groups or one-on-one interviews. The following topics were discussed: 1) experience working with Aboriginal offenders and offenders who self-injure; 2) challenges that arise when working with these groups; 3) treatment of self-injury; and 4) the role of culture in self-injury desistance. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A phenomenological approach was used to analyze the transcripts. Responses were classified into themes and categories to illustrate the structure or commonalities of experiences described by participants.

### For more information

Power, J., Beaudette, J., & Varis, D. (2014). *Staff Perspectives on Working with Aboriginal Offenders who Self-Injure: What Works, What Doesn't, and the Role of Culture* (Research Report R-317). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

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