

Storro's self injury differs from others, experts say

People who engage in such behavior typically avoid face



Photo by Zachary Kaufman

Bethany Storro is flanked by her parents, Nancy and Joe Neuwelt, during a press conference at Legacy Emanuel Hospital in Portland earlier this month. Police say Storro admitted Thursday that she lied about being attacked by a woman who threw acid in her face in downtown Vancouver and that her injuries were self-inflicted.

By Tom Vogt

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Bethany Storro is one of many people who injure themselves each year, experts say.

But the Vancouver woman, who told police Thursday she threw acid in her own face, went far beyond in one big area.

"The face is somewhat sacred," said psychologist Wendy Lader. "I've worked with self-injurers for more than 20 years, and have never had one who'd thrown acid in their face."

Lader is clinical director of a Chicago-based program for people who deliberately injure themselves. In 1986, she helped start the S.A.F.E. Alternatives treatment program with CEO Karen Conterio.

"Self injury is not that unusual," Lader said. While the injuries often involve cutting, "I've had clients who have set themselves on fire, who drank caustic liquids, who poured caustic substances on themselves."

"A cigarette to the skin is not uncommon," Conterio said. "Using lye is less common, but it has been used. Years ago, someone taped wads of paper on herself and set them on fire."

Still, "Most people are very protective of their faces. Self injurers have the ability to hide," Lader said, "but when the face is damaged, you have no ability to do that."

Conterio and Lader both have been following the case from a distance, and Conterio saw Storro's recent national TV appearance on "Good Morning America."

They would need a lot more information to theorize why Storro injured herself on Aug. 31 in downtown Vancouver. But they did discuss some of the factors that lead people to hurt themselves.

Depression often underlies this behavior.

It can happen when a person feels guilty about something, Conterio said. If they believe they need to be punished, they injure themselves to atone for it.

It can be precipitated by some kind of breakup, Conterio said. (Storro recently went through a divorce).

People sometimes create their own medical problems to gain sympathy, Lader said. "This would engender a lot of sympathy from people, the fact that she did it in public, got a lot of support and concern.

"I did read she'd been hard of hearing and got attention from medical personnel early in life," Lader said.

Lader emphasized that she wasn't pitching a theory, "But those would be kinds of things I'd look at."

"I would doubt it was her first" instance of self-injury, Conterio said. It would be unusual to make such a serious behavioral change at age 28, Conterio said.

Conterio recalled making a mental note when she saw Storro on "Good Morning America."

"She thanked God she was able to stop and get sunglasses" before the purported acid attack, Conterio said. "That saved her eyes."

If Storro hadn't stopped to get the sunglasses, she probably wouldn't have crossed paths with the attacker, Conterio thought, and "You would have not been the victim."

Storro will have an opportunity for treatment, but its success will depend on her, Conterio said.

"If they don't want to stop, it's virtually impossible to give up," Conterio said.

By way of comparison, Conterio said that "Alcoholism is a disease.

"We treat self-injuring as a choice, and we help them understand it is a choice. Patients tell us we screw up their ability to injure themselves. They can't pawn it off on anybody else," Conterio said.

Conterio was interested in some of the online comments posted by people who read web versions of the story and took issue with donations to Storro.

"This is not a healthy behavior," Conterio said. "Mental health budgets are so strapped; maybe a fund should be set up for people who injure themselves."

At one point, an appearance by Storro on the "Oprah" show was under discussion. The story has changed, but it's still a significant story, Conterio said.

"I hope Oprah invites her back," Conterio said, "to educate people about what happened."

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