

## beating myself up, literally

by Jenny Rough

■ It's funny I married a guy with the last name Rough, because my husband Ron is Mr. Gentle. I'm the one that's adopted the literal meaning of our name.

On bad days, my thoughts peck at me in the morning, and I smack my head. Outside walking the dog, I think about my budding career as a writer (voice: *you might fail*). I think about our family finances (voice: *if you do fail, you'll have to return to your awful career as a lawyer*). I worry about flab (voice: *when will you ever firm up your gut?*). Then I beat myself up over the fact that I'm beating myself up (voice: *you're so blessed, you shouldn't feel tense and anxious*). At each thought, my arms fling upward, taking turns slapping my forehead.

Most women and girls mentally "beat themselves up" with self-critical thoughts. Up to 24% of the adolescent and young adult population intentionally inflicts self-harm. Some are so judgmental of their weight that they wind up with an eating disorder. Others cope by acting out in the form of cutting or burning. A less mild form of self-injury—about 1% of the population, according to clinical psychologist Cara Gardenswartz—includes hitting or punching. That's me.

I'm aware my behavior is strange. Even though I live an otherwise functional life, I don't see other people hitting themselves over the head.

Hitting is an impulse control issue, Dr. Gardenswartz says. "A lot of the time, women can't tolerate their emotions, so they hurt themselves to take away their current feelings or numb their pain." According to another expert, Dr. Kimberly Dennis, medical director at Timberline Knolls Residential Treatment Center, shame is a huge part of self-injury. "Healing comes from taking the step of becoming self-aware and decreasing the shame."

Stonybrook's Dr. Edward G. Carr listed five reasons for self-injurious behavior, in a 1977 *Psychological Bulletin*. The one that made the most sense to me was the last: "Self-injurious behavior is an attempt to ... reduce guilt."



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Dr. L., a therapist who told me I didn't have Tourette's, once said, "When you hit, it's your anger coming out."

"Anger?" I'd asked. "What am I angry at?"

"That's what we're here to figure out," she said, assuring me my anger wasn't any worse than the average woman's. She said I needed to find a "less primitive" way to handle it. So I signed up for boxing lessons. Maybe boxing wasn't a huge step from knuckle-dragging Neanderthal behavior, but I figured it was better to direct my anger onto a bag instead of myself.

My boxing instructor, Phil, was missing a few teeth and the ones he still had were black and broken. He taped my wrists and gave me a pair of gloves to practice on him. I pummeled into him: jab, cross, hook. He lost his balance.

"Wow, you can hit, baby," he said.

"I have pent-up anger," I said. Jab, cross, hook. This time he stood planted.

"All you ladies do," he smiled his missing-tooth smile.

One day we were shadowboxing and he yelled, "Pivot!" When I turned I found myself facing a mirror. As I swung into the air, I flinched. I witnessed my fist knocking my reflection squarely in the face. My chest began to tighten, but I continued to throw punches until I no longer knew if the sting in my eyes was from sweat or tears. Finally, I collapsed onto the floor. Racing to bring me bottled water, Phil rubbed a cold washcloth over my head and arms.

"Take it easy," he said. "You ladies are too hard on yourselves."

He was right. How could I stop beating myself up? Learn to be gentle?

I haven't found all the answers, but I've found some. I started to notice, for instance, that I'm most apt to hit myself when I analyze previous interactions with others, especially strangers or acquaintances. I've never felt at ease with people I don't know; instead, I feel self-conscious and fearful that I'm being judged. With friends and family, on the other hand, I'm confident they love me despite my imperfections. I also tend to hit myself over work-related issues where I'm tempted to compare myself to others and bring up my inner critic—and my anger. When I feel like I've failed to meet my expectations—whether it's about how to converse with others, achieving a career goal, or even my inability to stop hitting—I'm furious. My expectations, I'm realizing, can be unreasonable.

Lately, I've been trying to embrace my not-so-perfect self. And I've continued to find other outlets for my anger. Yoga helps. Writing helps. Retreating into nature helps. Meditating, I've heard, will release my mind's destructive thoughts and bring me to a place of stillness.

So one day, I cross my legs, lengthen my spine, and rest my hands on my thighs. Then I close my eyes. My mind wanders to an interview lined up for tomorrow, a birthday gift I need to buy, and crap—that thank-you card I never sent. My palm starts to fling towards my forehead, but I catch myself. Calm down, Jenny. Picture the dune sands. Be gentle. I'm surprised to hear this other voice; it's my voice and it's rising out of my core instead of my mind.

As my pulse slows, my frustration begins to fade.

Maybe today will be a good day. [bw]