The Cycle of Self-Injury

A: MENTAL ANGUISH
Intrusive thoughts, images, flashbacks, body memories (physical sensations), negative self-beliefs, feeling trapped. A fire starts smouldering

B: EMOTIONAL ENGULFMENT
Smouldering fire sparks powerful feelings and emotions – trigger a raging inferno. Frightened, desperate, about to explode, or dissociated

F: THE GRIEF REACTION
Reality of actions starts to sink in. Shame, guilt, self-disgust or self-hate may rekindle the smouldering embers. Because underlying issues remain unresolved, the cycle continues unless change is effected at point A

C: PANIC STATIONS
The raging inferno gathers momentum. Feeling out of control, too numb (detached, distant, disconnected). Compelling urge to self-injure

D: ACTION STATIONS
Self-injures, which extinguishes the raging inferno inside, or alleviates the feelings of alienation.

Act may be carried out in a state of:
- Awareness (feels pain)
- Partial awareness (some pain)
- Non-awareness (dissociative)

Act may be motivated by:
- Need to release tension or anxiety
- Need to communicate distress
- Need to feel pain (punish)
- Need to escape from emotional pain (dissociative)
- Need to end dissociative state
- Need to exert sense of control
- Need to ward off suicidal thoughts

E: FEEL BETTER / DIFFERENT
With the raging inferno under control:
- Relief from tension and emotion
- Feeling of euphoria, numbness or detachment
- Sense of feeling more alive, more real, more grounded in reality, or (if motivation was punishment) degree of satisfaction

Generally, feels calmer, more in control, comfortably numb, think more clearly. Self-injury appears to reduce level of emotional and bodily arousal to a tolerable level, and internal chaos is soothed. Physical injuries seem small price to pay to escape from the raging inferno.

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