

What about Self-Injury?

Taken in part, from the American Self Harm Information Clearing House, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the Safe Alternatives website.



Self-injury, also known as self-harm, self-inflicted violence, self-injurious behavior, or self-mutilation, can be defined as the deliberate, direct injury of one's own body that causes tissue damage or leave marks for more than a few minutes and that is done in order to deal with an overwhelming or distressing situation. Behaviors include cutting, burning, hitting, poking, hair pulling and head banging; the most common form is cutting. Self-injury is a maladaptive mechanism by which trouble teens cope with extreme and painful emotions. People who self-harm are typically not attempting suicide. By expressing their inner pain through injury, they are keeping themselves from suicide. However, people who self-harm can become suicidal or accidentally kill themselves.

It's important to remember that, even though it may not be apparent to an outside observer, self-injury is serving a function for the person who does it. Figuring out what functions it serves and helping someone learn other ways to get those needs met is essential to helping people who self-harm. Some of the reasons self-injurers have given for their acts include:

- Affect modulation (distraction from emotional pain, ending feelings of numbness, lessening a desire to suicide, calming overwhelming/intense feelings)
- Maintaining control and distracting the self from painful thoughts or memories
- Self-punishment (either because they believe they deserve punishment for either having good feelings or being an "evil" person or because they hope that self-punishment will avert worse punishment from some outside source)
- Expression of things that can't be put into words (displaying anger, showing the depth of emotional pain, shocking others, seeking support and help)
- Expression of feelings for which they have no label -- this phenomenon, called alexithymia (Literally no words feeling), is common in people who self-harm

Self-mutilators can have underlying personality or mood disorders and depression. Self-mutilation appears to have a contagious affect among peer groups.

Most family members feel at a loss when they find out about a loved one who self-injures. They might begin to question their past behavior toward their child and worry that, from now on, every word or action will prompt an incident of self-injury. Family members usually describe initial feelings of shock, fear, confusion, and frustration. Many fear that their child will attempt suicide. As you have read, self-injury is not typically a suicide attempt, but it is a sign of depression and other deep emotions.

Family members of self-injurers often agonize about how to approach the topic. Some relatives want to deny the problem, or think the behavior is too crazy to accept or understand. Others are worried about how this behavior will reflect on them.

Family Intervention Tips for Self-Injury

- The first thing to do when you suspect, or find out, that your loved one is self-injuring is to think through how you are going to respond. Don't respond impulsively, but do make sure they are safe.
- If you are only suspicious, then ask your child if they are physically harming themselves.
 - If you know they are, tell them that you are there to help.
 - Share your concerns in a nonjudgmental manner.
 - Tell them that you know they must be in a lot of emotional pain, and you are sorry that they are 'needing' to do this in order to feel better.
- If they say, "it's no big deal", ask them if the reason they are saying that, is because they fear you'll get mad.
 - If they answer no and continue to minimize the behavior, then tell them that you would like to get a professional evaluation.
- Ask them if they have had thoughts of suicide.
 - If they say yes, then ask if they have a plan. If they do, then get immediate professional help by taking them to an emergency room, psychiatric hospital, or the crisis center for an evaluation.
 - If they say no, then ask them if they know why they self-injure and whether or not they are scared.
 - Tell them you'll be there to listen to whatever they have to say. Be prepared to hear things that may be difficult for you to accept. If you know that you have not always been there for them, consider telling them that you will be there for them now.
 - Tell them that self-injury is not something they have to, or should, deal with by themselves.
 - Check your child's body on a regular basis: arms, legs, torso, and where ever else they are cutting.
 - Do consider seeking professional counseling.

Things not to do or say:

1. Display anger
2. Tell them to just stop it
3. Injure yourself - to show them how it makes you feel when they self-injure
4. Think of it as 'just a phase', or 'just for attention'
5. Punish or ground them

If your child's friend is self-injuring, here are some tips for them:

It is important that you take care of yourself first. People who self-injure often put friends (intentionally or not) in helpless situations. A common request of a self-injurer is to ask a friend not to tell anyone else about their self-injury. They may hold their friend 'hostage' with the threat, "if you tell..... I'll cut myself". You may think you always have to be available so that they do not self-injure. Friends tend to want to help the self-injurer in any way that they can, even if the self-injurer does not want the help. Knowing how much, and how often to intervene can be overwhelming. Setting boundaries within the relationship or deciding when to let go can also be stressful.

Friend Intervention Tips for Self-Injury

- Ask about it. If your friend is hurting him or herself, he/she may be glad to have you bring it up so they can talk about it.
 - If she's not injuring herself, she's not going to start just because you said something about it.
- Don't be judgmental, but show concern.
- Tell your friend that you cannot keep their self-injury secret. Explain to them that it puts you in an uncomfortable position.
 - Tell them you will confide in people that you think can help (teachers, school counselor, school nurse, clergy, your parents, therapist, family doctor....)
- Let them know you will go with them to talk with a school counselor, or their parent, if they want.
- Know your limits. Are you spending more time worrying about your friend self-injuring, and less time about your needs?
- Seek support. Knowing a friend is hurting herself this way can be frightening and stressful. Tell a teacher, parent, or other trusted adult.
 - This person could help your friend get the help she needs, and help you with your feelings too.
 - Remember, you can talk to a school mental health professional about how the situation is affecting you, or you can get more information and advice from any number of organizations.
- If your friend self-injures and blames you, tell them that you are not taking responsibility for their self-injury. This scenario is most common after a 'break up.' The self-injurer may tell you, "If you leave me I'll cut."
 - Do not stay in the relationship as a result of manipulative threats.
 - Tell them that you hope they will take responsibility for their behavior, not self-injure and get the help they need.
- Remember, a healthy relationship is one of honesty, compromise and communication.
- Remember you're not responsible for ending the self-abuse. You can't make your friend stop hurting himself or get help from a professional. The only sure thing you can do is keep being a good friend.

Additional resources:

- National Mental Health Association (fact sheet)
<http://www.nmha.org/self-injury>
- The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery
<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/resources.html>
- Self-Injury Hotline: **1-800-Don't Cut**