

Helping a friend or family member who cuts or self-injures

It's very difficult to come to terms with the fact that someone you care about is cutting or self-harming. You may feel shocked, confused, or even disgusted by self-harming behaviours – and guilty about admitting these feelings. But acknowledging your discomfort to yourself is actually an important first step toward helping your loved one. And once you recognize how you feel, a big part of getting beyond any distaste or revulsion about self-harm is to learn about it. Understanding why your friend or family member is self-injuring can help you see the world from his or her eyes; giving you an important new perspective – and making you more mentally prepared to help.

Helpful tips in dealing with someone who self-injures

- **Understand.** It is vital to understand that self-harming behaviour is an attempt to maintain a certain amount of control which in and of itself is a way of self-soothing.
- **Reassure.** Let the person know that you care and are available to listen – and then be available.
- **Encourage.** Encourage expressions of emotions, including anger.
- **Spend time.** Spend time doing enjoyable activities together.
- **Find resources.** Help your friend or family member find a therapist or support group. If you don't know how to find help, encourage your loved one to talk to someone who might be able to help, such as a teacher, a school counsellor, or your minister.
- **Don't judge.** Avoid judgmental comments or telling the person to stop the self-harming behaviour.
- **Examine and change.** If the self-harmer is a family member, especially if it is your young person, prepare yourself to address the difficulties in your family. This is not about blame, but rather about learning new ways of dealing with family interactions and communications that can help the entire family.

Talking about self-injury can be an important first step

Ignoring a friend or family member's cutting and self-harm may help reinforce the feeling of shame surrounding the behaviour. A lack of communication can also increase their feelings of isolation and alienation. You can help create change just by talking, but many family members find it difficult to know what to say.

DOs and DON'Ts of talking with a loved one who self-harms

DO:

Talk about the subject of emotional pain. This way the self-injurer can talk about their internal suffering, rather than express it by hurting themselves.

Ask questions such as:

- “How long have you been hurting yourself?”
- “Why do you hurt yourself?”
- “How do you hurt yourself?”
- “How often do you injure yourself?”
- “Do you want to change your self-injury behaviour?”
- “How can I help you?”

DON'T:

- **Keep asking questions** if the self-injurer does not wish to talk about their cutting or self-harm. It may cause further alienation and make them feel even more alone and isolated.
- **Tell an individual to not injure him- or herself.** This is their way of coping, a final attempt to relieve emotional pain, and they will continue to hurt themselves as long as they feel it's necessary. Telling them not to will just make them hide it more.
- **Try to impose limits.** This may increase your family member's self-harming behaviour in order for them to feel as if they have control over the situation.

SOURCE: *Self-Injury.net*

