

Tips for Talking with your Child About Self-Injury

A Handout for Parents

It can be a very difficult thing to find out that your child is hurting himself/herself on purpose. This handout is designed to help you talk with your child about self-injury.

Before you talk to your child, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Self-injury is a treatable issue. There is help and hope for your child.
- Try not to blame yourself. Everyone experiences difficult feelings. Your child is coping with those feelings in an unhealthy way. Your child can learn to cope with feelings in a healthy way.
- Children self-injure for many reasons. Here are some common reasons:
 - To release emotions or relieve tension
 - To distract themselves from distressing thoughts
 - To self-punish (because they feel badly about themselves or are angry at themselves)
 - To seek a sense of nurturing from caretakers or friends
 - To re-gain a sense of control when they are feeling powerless
 - To release endorphins, which physiologically improves the mood
 - To feel more “alive” when they are feeling emotionally numb
 - To purge themselves of bad feelings “bleed out the bad”
 - To imitate friends or experiment with behavior that is glorified in music/media
 - To create permanent self-decoration/art on their bodies

Try NOT to:

- Yell at or blame your child.
 - Most children will shut down as soon as they feel blamed. Then you may never know what they are really feeling and why. This response also leads to feelings of guilt and shame for letting you down, which leads to more feelings they don’t know how to cope with, which leads to self-injuring again...and the cycle repeats.
- Punish your child for self-harm.
 - If you punish, they likely won’t stop the behavior; they will hide it instead. Also, punishment or isolation (ie. grounding from friends, activities, etc.) often removes healthy coping opportunities that need to be encouraged at this time.
- Make your child promise never to do it again.
 - It takes time to learn new coping skills. If they self-injure again in the meantime and break a promise, they will likely feel guilty and hide it rather than tell you.
- Change the way you make or enforce rules and routines in your household for fear of upsetting your child.
 - Don’t walk on eggshells. (Continue to set expectations and discipline your child when it’s appropriate.)
- Remove your child’s privacy or create a ritual of checking their body every day.
 - This extra attention can be reinforcing of the behavior.

What to DO:

I. Seek medical attention for injuries if necessary.

II. Talk to your child about why they self-injure.

- Take time to listen - without interrupting, lecturing, or arguing. Remember, their feelings are real to them.
- Ask your child where in the house they self-injure, what time of day, and what they use to self-injure. Self-injury can be ritualistic. Remove the objects they use to self-injure.
- Reassure your child that you will help and support them.
- Create an environment of open communication. Let your child know they can talk to you about their feelings and urges to self-harm. They need to know you can talk about it calmly.

III. Ask your child if they are thinking about suicide. Remember that children who self-injure are not necessarily suicidal, but they can be.

- If your child is having thoughts of suicide, do not leave your child unsupervised. Refer to the “Tips for Keeping Your Child Safe” handout and contact a mental health professional immediately.

IV. Make a plan

- Ask your child to tell you when they feel like self-injuring before they act. You may want to create a code phrase such as “I’m feeling down” or “I’m feeling that way again.”
- Seek support for your child from other trusted adults (ie. a family friend, aunt, etc.)
- Have your child create a pie chart of all their stressors. Then problem-solve each one together.
- Work with your child to create a written list of healthy coping strategies. Have them hang it in their room. Get creative. Healthy strategies that are effective are:
 - Things they do in a different room than where they self-injure
 - Things that involve a physical component/exercise (especially for children who do it to release emotions/anger or for a “rush” of endorphins)
 - Things they can do in a place where they are not alone (self-injury usually occurs in private)
 - Things that require the use of their hands (if they are doing something else with their hands, they aren’t self-injuring)

Examples may be journaling, drawing, playing with the family dog, playing video games, talking to a trusted adult, sculpting with playdoh, moon sand, or putty, going for a walk or bike ride, etc. Have your child choose things they enjoy doing.

- Schedule an un-interrupted hour a week for doing something enjoyable with your child.
 - Contentious topics such as grades, discipline, and chores are off limits during this time. Give positive attention and strengthen your relationship. Consider letting your child teach you about something they are interested in (ie. a video game, skateboarding, art, music).
- Consider seeking professional help for your child. Your child might need help learning new, healthy coping skills. Your child may need to be evaluated for depression.

V. Be involved

- Pay attention to the music your child is listening to. Music will tell you a lot about how your child is feeling and what they are thinking about.
- Carefully monitor your child’s social media and text messages.
- Encourage your child to participate in fun family activities to reduce time spent alone in their room.