

Helping Youth Who Self-Injure

Suggestions for Family Members

It can be difficult understanding adolescent behavior, let alone a teen who self-injures. A parent's response to self-injury can have a big impact on their child's recovery. *No matter how well parents respond to self-injury, it's important to remember that self-injury requires professional treatment.*

In Responding to Self-Injury Parents/Guardians Should:

- Seek professional help as soon as possible
- Approach your child in a calm and caring way employing a low-key demeanor
- Accept your child even though you do not accept their behavior
- Let your child know how much you love them
- Not only express love or concern when your child self-injures (may reinforce behavior)
- Understand that self-injury is a way that your child copes with intense emotion
- Understand that self-injury is about managing emotional distress – not about suicide
- Encourage your child to use healthier methods of managing emotion (i.e., reading, going for a walk, talking, listening to calming music, watching a funny movie, etc.)
- Keep communication open by talking about topics that are meaningful to your child
- Allow your child to share their feelings in whatever way is comfortable (i.e., writing, drawing, painting, song-writing, etc.)
- Discover your child's personal strengths and encourage their use during difficult times

In Responding to Self-Injury Parents/Guardians Should Not:

- Say or do anything to cause guilt or shame (e.g., "Why would you do such a thing?")
- Act shocked or appalled by your child's behavior
- Talk about your child's self-injury in front of friends or relatives
- Lecture your child as to what they should or should not do
- Use punishment or negative consequences when your child self-injures
- Use professional counseling as a punishment (e.g., "If you ever do that again, you're going to have to see a therapist")
- Overprotect by monitoring every move your child makes - this fosters resentment
- Deny that your child is self-injuring
- Blame themselves for their child's behavior
- Conduct room searches to confiscate all implements - it may make self-injury worse
- Minimize your child's self-injury by saying things like, "You're just doing it for attention"

Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for 24/7 free and confidential support at 1-800-273-8255.

*Adapted from, "See My Pain!" Creative Strategies and Activities for Helping Young People Who Self-Injury."
Bowman, S. & Randall, K. (2006).*