



# Parent Fact Sheet: Self-Injury

## **What is Self-Injury?**

Self-injury occurs when an individual chooses to inflict wounds upon themselves because of psychological distress. Although it is difficult to understand, this behavior becomes a coping mechanism for some people. Feelings of anxiety and distress, being “outside” one’s body, and a need for self-punishment are among the reasons self-injurers cite for their behavior.

These acts are typically not intended as an act of suicide, and they are not due to intellectual disability, autism, or other developmental disorders.

## **What are Some Common Forms of Self-Injury?**

- Cutting in lines on the arms and legs (with razor blades or knives)
- Repeatedly picking at scabs or injuries
- Erasing burns onto any part of the body
- Using matches or cigarettes to burn the body
- Hair pulling
- Head banging
- Punching walls or other hard surfaces repeatedly—may also take the form of hitting oneself (Look for bruised or bloodied knuckles)

## **Warning Signs that a Family Member is Self-Injuring**

- Unexplained wounds or scars from cuts, bruises, or burns, usually on the wrists, arms, thighs, or chest.
- Blood stains on clothing, towels, or bedding; blood-soaked tissues.
- Sharp objects or cutting instruments—such as razors, knives, needles, glass shards, or bottle caps—in the person’s belongings.
- Frequent “accidents.” Someone who self-injures may claim to be clumsy or have many mishaps, in order to explain away injuries.
- Covering up. A person who self-injures may insist on wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather.
- Needing to be alone for long periods of time, especially in the bedroom or bathroom.
- Isolation and irritability.

## **Why do they do it?**

Research has not been able to clearly define the life factors that lead to self-injury. However, what research has shown is that self-injurers are using the self-injury to relieve extremely uncomfortable feelings. In fact, those who do it believe that self-injury helps them in the following ways:

- Expresses feelings that they can’t put into words, or releases the pain and tension that they feel inside.
- Helps them feel in control or relieves guilt.
- Distracts them from overwhelming emotions or difficult life circumstances.
- Makes them feel alive, or simply feel something, instead of feeling numb.





# Parent Fact Sheet: Self-Injury

## **What do I do now?**

- Take a deep breath—this is tough, but it is better that you know about it.
- Realize that you cannot solve the problem, but you can access help.
- Access help!! Find a mental health professional and make an appointment as soon as possible.
- Do NOT tell your child that they must stop self-injuring—it won't work; it will just create frustration.
- DO remove readily available items for self-injury, but realize your child will probably find something else.
- DO immediately attend to physical damage and take your child to professional medical care when needed.
- DO provide a listening ear when your child needs someone to talk to—create an accepting atmosphere for him or her.
- DO help coordinate safety plans for your child between your mental health professional and the school mental health staff.
- DO keep the school updated about any changes in your child's intervention plan and his or her overall status.

