



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.





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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.

