

Helping A Friend Who Self-Injures

Q: What do I do if I think my friend is self-injuring?

A: Hidden pain can find healing when brought to light with the help of a trusted friend or adult. Your best options are to tell a trusted adult (e.g., your school counselor, a teacher, your parents, your friend's parents, your youth pastor), and/or ask your friend directly. But remember, good friends do not tell other students and they do not gossip or spread rumors no matter how tempting.

What you can say

“It may be none of my business, but I do care about you as a friend and noticed some marks on your arm. Have you been cutting?”

Q: What do I do if my friend tells me they self-injure and makes me promise not to tell anyone?

A: This is an unfair position for your friend to put you in. Tell them you want to be supportive to them but that this places you in an uncomfortable position. Tell your friend that you can't keep their self-injury a secret and that you will tell an adult you think can help, like your school counselor, teacher, parents, pastor/clergy, or school nurse. Assure them you won't gossip or spread rumors.

What you can say

“I'm sorry you're going through this. What a tough situation. I don't feel like I can handle this by myself and I feel uncomfortable keeping it a secret from people who could help, like [insert name of trusted adult here]. I have to tell [same name], but I won't tell any of our other friends without your permission.”

Q: What if they get angry at me for telling an adult, even if it's someone we can trust?

A: There is an ancient proverb that says, “Wounds from a friend can be trusted.” The best kind of friend is the one who helps their friends get help even if it could cost them their friendship, not the one who prevents their friends from getting help for the sake of being liked by that friend. The difference between tattling and telling is that tattling on your friend to an adult is to purposely get your friend in trouble, but telling an adult is to purposely get your friend help.

What you can say

“I'm sorry you're angry that I told someone. I hope you can forgive me. I want you to know I care more about your safety as a friend than I do about me making you like me so I can feel good about myself. That would be selfish of me.”

Q: What should I do if my friend texts/calls me and tells me they just cut themselves or are thinking about doing it?

A: Some young people who do this are seeking reassurance that someone cares about them. It can sometimes be their way of “testing” who cares about them. Stay calm, express your concern, and ask them how you can help or what they need from you as a friend. This can be overwhelming for you in the moment, too, so be sure you don't tell them that you will stop being their friend if they don't stop the behavior. It's okay to request that they tell you when they are struggling and need your help but not to tell you if they've actually cut, especially if you struggle with this yourself and get triggered.

What you can say

“I'm sorry you're having a tough time. I do care about you, so please don't hurt yourself. I'm here to help, and it's okay to just tell me you're having a bad day and need help rather than telling me you're cutting or hurting yourself. What can I do to help?”

Q: My boyfriend/girlfriend self-injures, and when I try to break up with them they threaten to hurt themselves. What should I do?

A: For many, self-injury is a way to cope with intense emotions, including the fear and sadness that can go with a breakup. However, this is an unfair position for them to put you in. Both of you should understand that you are responsible for your own actions, not each other's. A relationship based in fear and threats is an unhealthy relationship. Tell them that you hope they receive support in working through the breakup. Be willing to help them look for help for their self-injury while recognizing it is not your role to be their counselor and you are not responsible for their decision to self-injure.

What you can say

“I’m sorry you feel the need to self-injure because of our breakup. Breakups are hard, but you can still choose not to hurt yourself. It’s your decision. I really wish you the best and hope you can talk to someone to help you through this. I would even be willing to help you find someone.”

Q: I care about my friend who self-injures, but sometimes I feel exhausted after always being there for them. I know I shouldn’t end our friendship because of their self-injury, but now I almost want to. What should I do?

A: Sometimes the best way to help our friends and family be emotionally healthy is to make sure we are staying emotionally healthy ourselves. Be sure to take care of your own emotional wellbeing. An emotionally healthy friend makes a better friend. It is okay to talk to a counselor to work on yourself and to talk to someone about the difficulties of supporting a friend who self-injures. As you take care of yourself, you can set healthier limits with your friend instead of ending your friendship with them.

Resources

<https://itriples.org>

<http://sioutreach.org>

www.selfinjury.com

www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu

www.recoveryourlife.com

www.selfinjuryfoundation.org