

## Self-Injury and Your Teen: How You Can Help

Approximately 18% of adolescents have engaged in nonsuicidal self-injury at some point in their lives. This means that nearly one in five teenagers have hurt themselves on purpose, without intending suicide, such as by cutting, burning, biting, hitting, or severely scratching themselves.

Few parents feel prepared how best to respond if they learn that their child has been intentionally hurting him or herself. Learning that your child self-injures can be a frightening realization, so what can you do to help?

- 1. Be self-aware** (rather than too self-assured).  
Be in tune now with your own emotions and reactions when you hear the term “self-injury” or “cutting.” A negative or kneejerk reaction might come across as non-empathic and judgmental. It may also inadvertently convey to your child that they cannot openly talk to you about their struggle with self-injury. Learn as much as you can about the behavior. The more knowledge you have (and the more you keep in mind that we, even as adults, have engaged in behaviors we know were clearly not in our best interest), the more equipped, empathic, and helpful you will likely be.
- 2. Be a good listener** (rather than a good problem-solver).  
Seeing your child in pain, physically or emotionally, can be extremely difficult to tolerate. Most parents want to fix the problem and take the pain away, and this is completely understandable. Ironically, sometimes simply listening to your teen rather than jumping to fix what’s wrong is where the real healing (and “fixing”) happens. Allowing them to talk while you simply listen without giving unsolicited advice can also help them process their emotions in a healthy way. Part of being a good listener is also asking good questions, so it’s okay to respectfully ask about their self-injury (e.g., “How does cutting help you? How can I help so that self-injury isn’t even needed?”).
- 3. Be an emotional container for your child** (rather than an emotional responder).  
When young children feel overwhelmed, they tend to look to their parents to gain a sense of safety and emotional comfort. A calm reaction from you can instill peace in them and teach them how to self-soothe. And this can even be true for teenagers. Many youth engage in self-injury to regulate their emotions when they feel overwhelmed, so encourage your teen to talk to you rather than turn to self-injury when they feel this way. But be prepared to respond calmly and to assist them with regulating their emotions. Too strong of an emotional reaction from you may permeate the “emotional container” or cause it to overflow and make it difficult for them to learn how to self-soothe or healthily regulate their emotions.
- 4. Be a healthy coping strategy to be utilized** (rather than a lecturer or punisher to be feared).  
Chances are your teen already recognizes that self-injury is not something you would approve of. In fact, many young people self-injure as a form of self-punishment, yet some parents may believe taking away their cell phone or other privileges will help them to stop. Be sure not to punish them for punishing themselves. Instead, express your concern about the behavior, offer to help or talk, and provide emotional support for them when they’re unable to emotionally support themselves (e.g., “It’s really hard for me to hear that you’re hurting

yourself. I don't like that you're doing this, but I'm here for you and we'll get through this together.”). Lectures and punishments may unintentionally teach them it's not safe to talk to you about self-injury, so they may choose to continue to engage in the behavior but simply no longer tell you about it. A good relationship with you is one of the healthiest and most protective coping strategies they could possibly have.

If you learn that your adolescent is self-injuring, consider consulting with a mental health professional, especially if you are concerned about the overall safety of your child. Talking to a therapist may help your child build healthier coping strategies, so suggest that he or she try meeting with a mental health professional for that extra support. Finally, be willing to seek out your own professional help for support as well. An emotionally healthy parent typically makes for a better parent.

#### **Additional resources**

[itriples.org](http://itriples.org)

[sioutreach.org](http://sioutreach.org)

[selfinjury.com](http://selfinjury.com)

[selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)