

Supporting a Friend who Self-Injures

Gustavus Adolphus College Counseling Center

Learning that someone you love dearly struggles with hurting him or herself can be difficult. Here are some tips for friends of individuals who engage in self-injurious behavior.

- Research and more fully understand self-injurious behavior. Self-injury is often used as an unhealthy coping mechanism to manage emotional pain.
- While the temptation to tell your loved one that he or she should stop self-injuring comes from a good place, adding the pressure of your judgment can hurt someone who engages in self-harm.
- Support your friend by letting them know you care about them.
- Learning that someone you love self-injures can bring up a lot of conflicting emotions. If someone you love confides in you that he or she self-injures, it may be a great emotional shock to you. Most who self-injure do so in secret, so while the behavior may have gone on for a long while, you may never have suspected it.
- You may want to deny that your loved one self-injures. This is a common reaction; however, denial is harmful for someone who self-injures, as it denies the emotional pain your loved one is experiencing.
- While you do not have to dwell on it, it's important to acknowledge that your loved one has a problem and needs help.
- You may feel frustrated. Self-injury isn't something you can control or necessarily feel as though you can help with. You cannot control the behavior of another, no matter how you'd like to. This may make you feel helpless.
- Make sure that you keep self-injury an open dialog between you and your loved one who self-injures. Ignoring self-injury does not make it go away, and can reinforce feelings of isolation and shame.
- If your loved one opens up about self-injury to you, know that it was an incredible burden for them to share. Thank them for trusting you with this information.
- Be available to your loved one within limits (limits YOU can handle). Caring for yourself appropriately is a way to model healthier forms of coping.
- If you're having challenges with coping with the self-injury of a loved one, don't hesitate to talk to a therapist about your feelings.

- Ask how you can help your loved one - it's often hard to know HOW to help. Instead of guessing, ASK!
- Keep the negative thoughts and judgment to yourself - you're certainly entitled to your feelings, but the person who self-injures doesn't need more shame heaped upon him or her.
- You may need to put up some emotional boundaries between yourself and your loved one. Be clear and consistent with your support as well as make sure that he or she knows that you have your limits and what they are.

What To Say To Someone Who Self Injures:

"I support you no matter what."

"Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me."

"How can I help?"

"What makes you want to hurt yourself?"

"Do you want to stop self-injuring?"

What NOT To Do If Your Loved One Self Injures:

Sometimes, despite our very best intentions, we say or do something to make our loved ones hurt more than they already are. Here are some things to avoid doing if you have a loved one who self-injures.

- Do not pressure your loved one to stop injuring. SI is an intensely shameful way of coping and adding the pressure of your judgment will likely serve to increase the self-injurious behavior.
- Don't issue an ultimatum - you must stop hurting yourself or ELSE. This will only make your loved one want to hide his or her shameful secret.
- Don't scold your loved one for injuring him or herself - he or she already feels shame for his or her behavior.
- Don't press the issue - if you've tried talking to your loved one who self-injures and he or she doesn't want to continue the conversation, don't force them.
- Don't make judgmental remarks about self-injury to your loved one. If you haven't walked around in their shoes, you don't know what it's like to be them.
- Don't assume that the person who self-injures is suicidal. Self-injury is not always a suicidal act, but be aware of any signs of suicidal ideation, planning, or intent as well.
- Seek out support for yourself as needed.

What Not To Say To Someone Who Self Injures:

"Why don't you just STOP?"

"You're just doing it for attention."

"You're crazy."

"You're trying to manipulate me."

"You're not the same person I thought you were."
"How could you do this to me?"