



LifeSIGNS Self-Injury Fact Sheet for Employers

What is Self-Injury?

Self-injury is any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical injury to a person's own body, with the intention of relieving distress. Self-injury is essentially a coping mechanism that enables a person to deal with intense emotional distress, creating a calming sensation. It may also be used to 'awaken' a person who is feeling numb or dissociated.

The injuries can validate a person's feelings, creating a 'real' pain that is easier to cope with than the hidden emotional pain.

Self-injury has an immediate effect, creating instant relief, but it is only temporary; the underlying emotional issues still remain. In time, self-injury can become a person's automatic response to the ordinary strains of everyday life, and both frequency and severity of self-injury may increase.

At LifeSIGNS we recognise that self-injury is a coping mechanism, and we never judge a person or tell them stop. Instead, we encourage them to make positive changes in their behaviour, and enable them to find healthier coping mechanisms so they may choose to move away from self-injury.

Types of Self-Injury

The most common forms of self-injury are scratching, cutting, burning and non-suicidal overdosing (chronic self-medication). Many people find unique ways to hurt themselves.

Who Self-Injures

Self-injury affects people from all walks of life, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, career, or personal strength. Self-injury affects men and women of all ages and in all occupations.



Indications of Self-Injury

Self-injury is very often a secretive behaviour and there may be no warning signs, but some of the things below might indicate that an employee is suffering emotional distress and relying on self-injury:

- Obvious cuts, scratches or burns that do not appear of an accidental nature;
- frequent 'accidents' that cause physical injury;
- regularly bandaged arms and / or wrists;
- taking more time off work either sick or to visit the doctor or hospital;
- wearing long sleeves and trousers even during hot weather;
- reluctance to wear a short-sleeved uniform.

How to manage

If you suspect an employee is self-injuring but it's not affecting their work, then your only concern should be for their emotional wellbeing. How a person deals with their distress in the privacy of their own home is their business, but if you care about their wellbeing then there are things you can do to help without focusing on your suspicions of self-injury:

- let the person know you are concerned about them and available to listen;
- ask if there's anything at work that's making the person unhappy. Maybe their workload is too stressful or they are being bullied by colleagues.
- if the problems are outside of work, then deal with it in the same way you would any employee in distress. Everyone uses coping mechanisms of one kind or another, and a person should not be judged negatively because their coping mechanism may be self-injury.
- if self-injury is disclosed remain calm and non-judgemental at all times;
- let them know what you, as an employer, are prepared to do to help;
- if your company has an Occupational Health programme, encourage the employee to seek appropriate help;
- be clear about your company's rules and expectations, while endeavouring to treat the person as an individual with unique circumstances.

If work is affected

An employee cannot be sacked simply because they self-injure, but if it's affecting their work or colleagues then you have the right to discuss with them how they might manage their self-injury while continuing to work effectively and within your company's rules and regulations.

An employee who is self-injuring is suffering internally, but we understand they are employed to do a job, and so do they. Most people who self-injure want to be able to carry on with their lives as normally as possible, and self-injury can sometimes be the only thing that enables them to do so. Helping them resolve any employee issues should help you both.

Helping an employee work

- most people who self-injure prefer to keep their self-injury to themselves. Be flexible where possible regarding uniform, and respect confidentiality;
- be understanding with regard to time off for appointments etc. But if your employee is taking too much time off work, let them know where they stand regarding sick-pay and any requirement to make up missed time;
- it is not acceptable for anyone to self-injure, or flaunt their self-injury, in front of others. If this is happening then be clear that the behaviour is unacceptable.
- self-injury is a coping mechanism. Focus on the emotional distress behind it rather than the self-injury itself.
- educate yourself about self-injury and provide access to information and resources regarding self-injury and emotional wellbeing to all employees.

An employee who is self-injuring to cope with emotional distress may be relying on self-injury just to get to work each day. They want to be a good employee, and are often very dedicated. With a little empathy and understanding on both sides, there's no reason why they can't be as great an asset to your company as anyone else.