

LifeSIGNS Self-Injury Fact sheet for Parents and Guardians

What is Self-Injury?

Self-injury is any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical injury to a person's own body. 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 themselves 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. We encourage them to make positive changes in their lives and in their behaviour, and enable them to find healthier coping mechanisms so they can choose to move away from self-injury.

Who Self-Injures

Self-injury affects people from all walks of life, irrespective of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or personal strength.

Types of Self-Injury

The most common forms of self-injury are scratching, cutting, burning and non-suicidal overdosing (frequent self-medication). People find their own unique ways to hurt themselves.

Finding out that Your Child Self-Injures

When you first discover your child has been self-injuring, you may understandably feel a mixture of anger, shock, guilt, worry and upset. Don't panic or over-react - your child is not alone, and neither are you. Self-injury is a coping mechanism, but it is non-suicidal behaviour and does not necessarily mean your child has a mental illness. Young people often struggle with home life, school, pressures to conform and achievement worries; don't assume your child has an easy life just because they 'seem happy' and you provide 'everything' for them.

How to deal with the situation

Your initial reaction and that first conversation will have a great impact on your child, and may affect how much they talk to you and trust your help.

Every situation is different and how you deal with it will depend on the relationship you have with your child, their age, the reasons behind their self-injury and also whether they came to you, or you discovered the self-injury by accident.

Points to consider:

- educate yourself about the issues surrounding self-injury - you can do this by visiting www.lifesigns.org.uk
- don't show disgust or anger. Any negativity will increase your child's emotional distress and may alienate them from you;
- recognise that you are not to blame for your child's self-injury, but be aware of the quality of your relationship with them - could it be improved in your child's eyes?
- let your child know you are there for them, but recognise that self-injury is often a secretive behaviour and the knowledge that you know about it could be overwhelming - they may need time to settle before talking properly;
- focus on the underlying problems behind your child's self-injury rather than on the self-injury itself;
- self-injury can take a long time to move away from, so be prepared for many months of recovery;



- don't ask them to just stop hurting themselves or remove the tools they use to self-injure - self-injury is something they have come to rely on in order to cope, and alternative, healthier coping mechanisms must be found first;
- offer to accompany your child to the doctor or a counsellor, but don't force them and respect their need for privacy and confidentiality, whatever their age;
- unless you are concerned that an injury may need medical attention*, don't ask to see your child's injuries - it will embarrass them and make them more secretive;
- remember that your child is the same person you knew and loved before - self-injury is just a small part of them;
- treat your child as usual - especially if there are other young people in the house who may need support in coping with their sibling's self-injury;
- encourage your child to seek health and happiness everyday (childhood should be fun);
- remember to take care of yourself - it is difficult coping with the self-injury of someone you love, so don't be afraid to seek extra support while you are helping your child.

When to seek medial attention

The majority of scratches and cuts can be dealt with at home, and you may like to provide some sterile dressings, antiseptic wash and plasters. Burns may need to be checked by a medical practitioner.

If an injury is serious or an overdose has been taken, medical attention should be sought. If in any doubt call NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 (UK only) for specific advice.

Be aware that although self-injury is non-suicidal behaviour, the emotional distress that leads to self-injury can also lead to thoughts of suicide. If you feel your child is at risk, seek urgent medical assistance.