

## **Self Injurious Behaviors: Frequently Asked Questions**

**For someone who is discovering and seeing that someone they care about is hurting themselves - it can be very scary, alarming, distressing. What would you say to these people? And what can they do to help the self-injurer?**

The first thing to recognize is that the self-injurer is not 'crazy'. They are instead trying to cope and survive in the best way they know how. The good news is that people can and do get better all the time, and go on to live healthy, happy and productive lives.

It is important for family to take the behavior seriously, but anger and hysterics are counter productive. It's important to keep the lines of communication open. Parents and friends should not be the therapist, it is helpful for self-injurers to have someone to talk to who can truly help them to identify the problem and learn healthier ways of responding.

**Are there statistics on who self-injures and how prevalent this behavior is?**

It is difficult to know for sure as researchers have used different populations, measures and definitions of self-injury to collect their data. However, in general studies on adolescents in community samples report a lifetime prevalence of between 15-20%. These numbers are higher in clinical populations.

**Why do kids self-injure**

There are a number of reasons why kids self injure, but the most prevalent is internal emotional regulation; that is, to either stop intensive and uncomfortable feeling states, or to "feel something" when numbed. It can also be used to communicate feelings or needs to others and perhaps even to impact the behavior of others (e.g. stop parents from fighting, stop a boyfriend or girlfriend from leaving etc).

**Are there specific clues that parents can watch for that might indicate a child is engaging in self-injurious behavior?**

- Unexplained cuts or bruises
- Kids who have trouble modulating emotional states especially sadness, fear and anger are at higher risk for self-injury.
- Low self-esteem as evidenced by a tendency to self-denigrate.
- Arms and legs are always covered such as wearing cold weather clothes such as long sleeves and pants in warm weather
- Presence of an eating disorder and possible substance abuse also seems to related to risk for self-injury.

**If a parent discovers that a child is self-injuring, are there certain things that the parent SHOULD NOT do? For instance, is a parent's reaction important? Can certain reactions to the behavior actually cause harm?**

A parent's reaction is very important.

- Parents should not react with intensity (e.g. fear or anger )
- Threats (e.g grounding etc) and rewards (e.g. you can stay up later if...) are rarely effective
- They should not ask "Why are you doing this to me?" or even "Why did you do that?."

**On the other side of the coin, what SHOULD a parent do to help their self-injuring child?  
Are there three or four concrete things that a parent can do to help their child start on  
the road to recovery?**

- Speak with your child calmly, and non judgmentally while expressing your love and concern.
- Listen, don't try to offer your opinion or "fix" the problem. The goal is to foster open communication
- Parents can state that they will educate themselves on self-injury so that they can better understand where their child is coming from
- Tell their your that you are concerned about them and that they can talk to you about anything.

**Are there certain things that a parent should look for in a therapist or therapy center?**

- Parents should look for professionals who are licensed to conduct therapy.
- Professionals should at least have expertise in working with adolescents and hopefully experience in working with those who self-injure as well.