



Does someone you care about self-injure?

Finding out that someone you care about hurts themselves on purpose can be a distressing and frightening experience. You may feel shocked, angry, sad or helpless and start to wonder if you could have done anything differently in your relationship with that person to stop them hurting themselves.

The best way to help a friend who self-injures, and to look after yourself as well is to offer your support but not to try to take responsibility for them. Although self-injury may seem destructive it is likely that it has been helping the person to cope. When they are ready and no longer need this way of coping, they will be able to make their own decisions to stop. This may take a long time and although you may be able to help them a lot on their journey, you need to accept that they must make it in their own way, at their own pace. In the meantime you can be a very valuable supporter.

'One of the hardest things is accepting that, no matter how much you love someone, you can't make everything all right for them. You can't stop them hurting themselves. Sometimes I just feel so helpless.'

Why do people self-injure

There are always reasons why people self-injure. These reasons vary from person to person. People often hurt their own bodies because it makes emotional pain more bearable. Some people say it gives them a sense of being in control when everything around them feels out of control and others describe a feeling of relief after they have hurt themselves. Self-injury can be linked to very difficult experiences like abuse or bereavement; it can be a way of expressing what feels too painful to put into words. The injuries people cause themselves are rarely life-threatening and are not intended as suicide attempts; in fact self-injury can be a coping mechanism, a means of helping a person carry on with life. **Some people will have a clear understanding of why they hurt themselves and others will not.**

Is self-injury hard to stop?

For some people their self-injury is a very important part of their lives, it may be the one thing they know they can rely on when things feel painful and they may not want to stop.

If someone is thinking about stopping, it will help them if they have an understanding of what their self-injury means to them, for example what makes them want to do it, how they feel after they have done it and what they feel they will be giving up if they do stop. People will also need to have alternative ways of dealing with what the self-injury has been helping them with. It can take a lot of emotional energy for someone to bring in another strategy to deal with painful feelings. In understanding their self-injury, people may need to return or increase it. Understanding, changing or stopping self-injury takes time and any step in this direction is an achievement.

How can I help someone who self-injures?

The most important things to offer someone who self-injures are acceptance and care. People often feel very judged and ashamed about their need to hurt themselves and telling another person can be a big deal. **If you can show the person that you care about them, and that it is ok for them to talk about self-injury you could make a really big difference to their experience.** If someone is talking about stopping, it may feel very supportive if you can acknowledge how frightening it may feel to give something up that they have relied on for some time

What can I say?

You can tell the person that you are happy to talk with them about self-injury, you can ask the person when it started and what was going on at the time. You can suggest that they recognise the urge to self-injure as a signal that something is wrong and see if they can come up with other ways of dealing with it. (See our information sheet for suggestions of distractions).

Does anything else help?

Making sure that you are looking after yourself is very important. Supporting someone who self-injures can be a long-term commitment and if you don't take care of yourself you may not be able to keep helping them. It is fine to limit how much time you talk about self-injury, and it is important that your relationship includes things that are light and fun. Remember there is more to your friend than their self-injury and keep relating to those other parts too. Make sure you have a place where you can share your feelings about self-injury and give yourself permission to be completely honest. Sometimes people feel a whole range of feelings including angry, frightened, disgusted, horrified and distressed about self-injury and it's important that those feelings are accepted. If you are a girl or young woman affected by someone's self-injury, you are welcome to have support from TESS through text or email if that feels like it would be helpful.