

# When Your Child is Self-Injuring

By Kimberly Enns, MSW, RSW

Trainer and Consultant with the Crisis & Trauma Resource Institute Inc.

Thirteen-year-old Sarah slams the door to her room and throws herself on her bed, crying. A disappointing math test result and a disagreement with her best friend have ruined her day. Negative thoughts race through Sarah's mind: "I'm so stupid at math! I probably got the worst mark in the class.....Why did Megan say she couldn't hang out with me this weekend? Does she hate me or something?" As Sarah's emotional state spirals out of control, another thought enters her mind: the recognition that cutting would make her feel better right now. She opens her dresser drawer. Hidden beneath the piles of clothing are some razor blades and towels. Hands shaking, she sits down on her bedroom floor, holds the blade to her forearm and makes a cut. Then another. Within moments, the endorphin release she experiences brings a sense of calm and relief. Sarah feels more in control and is able to move on with her day. Once again, cutting has done the trick. At least until the next trigger.

Sarah is one of many who turn to self-injury to cope with their emotional states. Self-injury refers to deliberate, self-inflicted tissue damage, such as cutting, burning or hitting. An individual may engage in self-injury for the purpose of reducing emotional distress, creating feelings from numbness, or as a form of self-punishment. The behaviour is distinct from suicide as the intention is not to die, but to improve one's emotional state. Self-injury has reached alarming proportions amongst our youth, with North American studies indicating adolescent prevalence of up to 18%. As the behaviour tends to be highly secretive, this number can be considered conservative.

Discovering that one's child is self-injuring can be shocking, devastating and bewildering to parents or caregivers. Parents may find out about their child's self-injury as a result of warning signs (such as unexplained injuries) or a self-disclosure. Additionally, the young person's school or a peer may inform the parents.

Understandably, parents may be at a loss in terms of how to respond or even understand the purpose of the self-injury behaviour. Caregivers may feel that the self-injury is attention-seeking, manipulative behaviour, or fear that their child is attempting suicide. This is very rarely the case. A place to begin is to recognize that the behaviour of self-injury is a way to express or cope with feelings about an underlying issue. It is a desperate act that effectively works at making a person feel better emotionally.

Upon discovering that one's child is self-injuring, it is important for parents to remain calm and to talk with them about it. Parents can not be their child's therapist and need to seek out professional help for them. The school, family doctor or local counselling centre can be good places to start. Parents themselves are strongly encouraged to speak with a therapist or counsellor who is familiar with self-injury in order to gain a better understanding of the function of the behaviour, intervention options and to process their own emotional response. Educating oneself about self-injury through books and websites is critical. Caregivers should also seek out their own support network, perhaps through a support group or by regularly speaking with trusted friends.

Parents may wonder what their role is once professional help is in place. The following list provides some guidelines:

- Remain calm and non-judgmental with your child – let them know that self-injury is okay to talk about, that you are learning more about it and are there to listen whenever they need you.
- Try not to react as though your child's self-injury is impossible to understand. Remember that self-injury is a coping mechanism and that they are doing the best that they can with the skills and inner resources that they have.
- Remember that extreme reactions (e.g., room searches, ultimatums, power struggles) may serve to trigger or maintain the self-injury behaviour.
- Assure them that they will not be punished for their self-injury behaviour.
- Try to gain an understanding of what triggers the self-injury behaviour (e.g., unhealthy family dynamics, issues with peers) but avoid probing or abrupt questions. Ask what you can do to assist in managing the triggers to self-injury.
- Involve the adolescent in decisions regarding rules, consequences and family activities.
- Spend quality time with your adolescent. Ensure that they do not have to struggle to get your attention.
- Offer support and validation of feelings without making judgments and before offering solutions. For example, starting with, "You're upset about what she said to you," rather than, "Are you sure this isn't an over-reaction? Maybe you should call her to clarify."
- Encourage communication regarding all emotions, even uncomfortable ones. Model this by sharing your own thoughts and feelings with your child.
- Assist your child in thinking of alternative, healthy ways of coping with intense, uncomfortable emotions.
- Model healthy ways of coping with stress and conflict.
- Talk with your child about the websites they are visiting. Though some self-injury websites are helpful in encouraging wellness, many are triggering and could be considered pro-self-injury.
- Talk to your child about his or her friends and the activities they do together. In some cases, peers encourage and reinforce self-injury.
- Communicate with your child's school about what is going on.
- Communicate with your child's counsellor regarding areas that you can assist with.
- Have realistic expectations. Understand that your child cannot just stop self-injuring - there may be relapses along the road to recovery.
- Celebrate small (and large!) steps towards recovery with your child.

A parent's journey with a child who is self-injuring may be long and painful, but those who find support for themselves, who seek to truly understand what is behind the behaviour and who support their child in the aforementioned ways, will find that there is much hope and healing in store. Self-injury can be overcome and a healthier path chosen.

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