

10 Helpful Responses To Self-Harm Behavior

1. Show that you see and care about the person in pain behind the self-injurious behavior.
2. Show concern for the injuries. The person who has self-harmed may try to mask the cause. Typically, the injury is prompted by feeling deeply distressed, ashamed, frightened, anxious, hopeless, and vulnerable. The self-harming person may interpret your withholding attention as cruel, and that can be counterproductive. This is your opportunity to provide compassion and respect and show them something different from the way they have been treated by most people in their lives.
3. Make it clear that it's okay to talk about self-injurious behavior and that it can be understood.
4. Convey your respect for the person's efforts to survive, even though this involves hurting themselves. Hold the assumption they are doing the best that they can.
5. Help make sense of their self-injury. For example: ask when the self-injury started and what was happening during this time. Explore how self-injury has helped the person to survive physically and emotionally in the past and now. Ask how they feel before they hurt themselves and how they feel afterwards. Together with them retrace the steps leading up to an incident of self-injury. This includes the events, thoughts, and feelings influencing the behavior that occurred right before the incident.
6. Acknowledge how frightening it may be to think of living without self-injury.
7. Encourage the person to use the urge to self-injure as signals of buried feelings, memories, and needs. These may be difficult to explore, so allow them to do so at their own pace. Help them to learn to express these things in other ways, such as talking, engaging in physical activity, distraction

techniques, etc. Encourage the person to ask for support and what they feel they need at that moment to regulate their mood/emotions.

8. Help the person to break down isolation and shame to build support networks.
9. Don't view stopping the self-injury as the only or most important goal. A person may make progress and still feel as though they need self-injury as a coping method for some time (in the same way that others make engage unhelpful coping- such as using substances, binge eating, etc.). Self-injury may also worsen for a while when previously unresolved feelings or experiences are being processed or when old patterns and ways of living are changed. This can be discouraging but is understandable.
10. It takes a long time for a person to be ready to discontinue self-injurious behavior. Encourage your loved one by acknowledging each small step as a major achievement. Examples of very valuable steps might be:

- Harm reduction, for example, washing implements used to cut or avoiding drinking if it usually leads to more self-injurious behavior.
- Taking better care of the injuries.
- Putting off hurting themselves for a day or an hour.
- Reducing the severity or frequency of the injuries.

These steps are important because they show that the person engaging in self-injury exercises some control over the situation and the “hold” of self-injury loosened.

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Author: Autumn Peterson, LMSW
Plain Language Reviewer: Ruti Volk, MSI, AHIP

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