

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. Instead, we encourage them to make positive changes in their lives and in their behaviour, and enable them to find healthier coping mechanisms in order that they may choose to move away from self-injury.

Who Self-Injures

Self-injury affects people from all walks of life, regardless 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). Many people find their own unique ways to hurt themselves.



Finding out that Your Friend Self-Injures

Discovering that someone you care about is hurting themselves can be overwhelming. If your friend tells you themselves, you may not know how to react or what to say. Or if you suspect your friend is self-injuring you may be unsure whether to mention it to them or not.

First of all, don't panic or over-react - your friend is not alone, and neither are you. Self-injury is a coping mechanism, but it is non-suicidal behaviour and does not usually mean your friend is at serious risk.

How to deal

Your initial reaction will have a great impact on your friend, and may affect your future relationship and how much they talk to you.

Keep in mind that self-injury is a coping mechanism, and if your friend is hurting themselves then it is because they are suffering some emotional distress. Avoid increasing this distress by considering the following points:

- educate yourself about the issues surrounding self-injury - you can do this by visiting www.lifesigns.org.uk
- don't be negative or accuse your friend of attention seeking or being an 'emo' - self-injury is a coping mechanism and your friend may just need to be heard;
- let your friend know you are there for them, but don't push them to talk to you unless they want to;

- don't gossip or tell anyone else about the situation unless your friend asks you to;
- focus on the underlying problems behind your friend's self-injury rather than on the self-injury itself - don't ask to see their scars or about the methods they use;
- don't tell them to stop - self-injury is something they have come to rely on in order to cope, and alternative, healthier coping mechanisms must be found first. Self-injury can take a long time to move away from;
- recognise your limitations and encourage your friend to seek help from a teacher or parent, but don't force them;
- treat your friend as usual, they are still the same person and self-injury does not make them abnormal or a freak;
- encourage your friend to seek health and happiness everyday and continue to do lots of fun things together;
- remember to take care of yourself - it is difficult coping with the self-injury of someone you care about, so don't be afraid to seek extra support yourself.

When to tell

Self-injury is a way of coping with emotional distress and is a non-suicidal behaviour. However the same problems that cause the emotional distress can also lead to thoughts of suicide.

If your friend ever mentions suicide, take it seriously and inform a teacher or parent, even if your friend asks you not to. Suggest that you can tell someone together.