

# FAST FACTS: Helping Students who Self-Injure

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Self-injury refers to a variety of behaviors when a person deliberately inflicts harm to his or her body without the intent to commit suicide. School personnel are usually the first adults to know of a student's self-injurious behaviors, thus it is important to be educated about the signs, symptoms, and causes surrounding it.

Because self-injury occurs so often in private, is very difficult to determine self-injury prevalence. However, many studies estimate between 4% and 38% of young adults and adolescents have self-injured. Additionally, while it is commonly assumed that females are more likely to self-injure than males, there are studies that suggest that males and females are equally likely to self-injure. Studies also indicate that while self-injury may be more common among Caucasians, there are also high rates among minority populations. Research also suggests that being a member of a sexual minority group is a risk factor for self-injury.

## Self-Injury: What is it?

Self-injury is sometimes referred to as "deliberate self-harm," "self-injury," "self-mutilation," "cutting," or "non-suicidal self-injury." It is most commonly associated with:

- Intentional carving or cutting of the skin
- subdermal tissue scratching
- burning
- ripping or pulling skin or hair
- swallowing toxic substances
- self-bruising
- breaking bones

Self-injury is strongly linked to childhood abuse, especially childhood sexual abuse. It is also linked to eating disorders, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, depression, and anxiety disorders.

## Why do people self-injure?

The reasons people report for practicing self-injury vary. Many report feeling overwhelming sadness, anxiety, or emotional numbness as common emotional triggers. Self-injury thus provides a way to manage intolerable feelings or a way to experience some sense of feeling. It is also used as a means of coping with anxiety, other negative feelings, or to relieve stress or pressure. However, regardless of the reason, self-injury may best be understood as a maladaptive coping mechanism.

It is important to distinguish between those attempting suicide and those who self-injure as a way to cope with overwhelming negative feelings. Most studies find that self-injury is often used as a way to *avoid* suicide; however it is difficult to completely separate the two acts as those who report self-injury *without suicide intent* are also more likely to report having considered or attempted suicide. Regardless, non-suicidal self-injury may be best understood as a symptom of distress that, if not successfully addressed, may lead to suicide attempts.

## Strategies for Working with Self-Injurers

Not knowing how to broach the subject of self-injury is often what prevents concerned individuals from intervening. However, concern for the person's well-being is often what many who self-injure need most, and persistent, but neutral, probing may eventually elicit honest responses. If someone confides in you that they self-injure, try to create the most caring environment possible by trying to:

1. **Avoid shock, shaming responses, or showing great pity.** Such reactions, if expressed in shocked or punitive ways, may reinforce self-injurious behavior and its underlying cause, and encourage the self-injurer not to seek care in the future. Be willing to listen to the self-injurer and encourage them to use their voice, rather than their body, as a means of self-expression.

2. **Accept and validate the self-injurers' emotions.** Encourage him or her to talk about self-injurious impulses and demonstrate openness to listening to them. Often self-injurers report that their emotions were not validated during early family life.

3. **Remain calm, dependable, and consistent.** Serve as a model for emotional control. Nurture conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills.

Remember, safety is of the utmost concern and it is required to notify the necessary parties if you learn of self-injurious behaviors. If someone has been injuring a long time or is injuring severely, it may be time to consider intensive treatment.

### What are signs of self-injury?

Warning signs for self-injury include:

- unexplained frequent injuries
- wearing long pants and sleeves in warm weather
- low self-esteem
- overwhelmed by feelings
- inability to function at work, school or home
- inability to maintain stable relationships

Most researchers agree that self-injury shows some **addictive qualities** and may serve as form of self-medication for some individuals. Additionally, the seemingly rapid spread of self-injurious behaviors among community populations of youth suggests that there may be a "fad" quality to the behavior or a **contagion factor** at work.

One of the most important things you can do is show you care!

Don't be afraid to state, *"I've noticed injuries that appear to be self-inflicted, I care about why you might be doing that"* or *"it appears you have hurt yourself, do you want to talk about it?"*

You will have made it clear that they are not invisible and that you are available when they are ready to seek help.

All information on this FAST FACT sheet is from the following websites:

<http://www.selfinjury.com/schools/>  
<http://www.crpsib.com/whatissi.asp>