

Talking to students about self-injury

by The International Consortium on Self-Injury in Educational Settings

How to start the conversation...

If you have reason to believe a student is self-injuring, approach the topic with a respectful curiosity. Rather than diving in with questions that might seem judgemental or interrogating, share your concerns in a way that invites discussion. For example, you could say:

"I notice you've been a bit agitated/withdrawn/upset (insert concern here) lately and/or I've noticed these marks/cuts/burns (insert method here). I don't mean to pry but I'm concerned about you. I know that sometimes students who have difficulty coping might self-injure. Is this something that is going on for you?"

What doesn't work?

OVERREACTING

Self-injury may bring about a range of emotions. However, reacting with a lot of emotion (e.g., shock, being very upset) when talking to individual about self-injury is unhelpful. These kinds of reactions can convey that you are uncomfortable with the discussion. This may shut down future conversations. Other reactions, such as reacting with too much concern can also be unhelpful. In some cases, these reactions to self-injury can also reinforce the behavior.

INTERROGATING

Asking questions in an interrogating manner (e.g., why did you, why don't you) can invalidate a student's experience and may convey that the student is doing something wrong. Also avoid questions and comments implying that it is easy to stop self-injury (e.g., don't ask people to "just stop," why don't you cope this way instead?")

JUMPING IN TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

While this often comes from a good place and a desire to help, trying to "fix" the problem or can come across as not listening to or hearing what the student has to say. Further, many students are not ready to stop self-injury. This may be especially the case early in conversations about self-injury. Many students may not be ready to talk about self-injury yet.

ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SELF-INJURY

Focusing too much on self-injury and paying too much attention to the details about self-injury episodes can detract from what underlies the self-injury; focusing on details can also be triggering to students. Related to this, avoid jumping to conclusions or making assumptions about why someone self-injures.

What does work?

USING A CALM, LOW-KEY TONE AND APPROACH.

This involves a calm and empathic approach that does not convey judgement of any kind.

- *It seems like it's been really hard for you recently. I understand that sometimes students self-injure to cope with difficult feelings and experiences. Is this the case for you?*
- *If the student starts to talk about self-injury, validate their willingness to do so. For example, you could say "I appreciate that you're willing to talk to me about this. I am sure it is not easy to do."*

RESPECTFUL CURIOSITY.

Asking questions is important but doing so in a respectful manner is especially critical. Conveying a sense that you genuinely want to understand a student's experience goes a long way in helping them feel understood (and helps your understanding too).

- *I know that self-injury can have different meanings and purposes for different people. I'd like to understand your experience better. Can you help me understand what self-injury does for you?*

ACKNOWLEDGING STUDENTS MAY NOT BE READY TO STOP

For many students, self-injury may be their only means of coping. So, the prospect of letting self-injury go can be scary for students. Part of this is also acknowledging the student may not be ready to seek professional help.

- *It sounds like self-injury would be hard to stop right now. That makes sense if you feel you don't have anything else when you feel so distressed and overwhelmed.*

FOCUS ON THE STUDENT'S OVERALL WELLBEING

Rather than focusing on just the self-injury, it is important to convey concern for the student's overall wellbeing. Self-injury is often a sign of other difficulties. Too much focus on self-injury can also invalidate the student's other experiences.

- *I'm concerned about your wellbeing and how you're doing. From what I understand about self-injury, there is usually a lot going on. I've heard for some people it's stress, for others it's difficulties in relationships, for some it's a way to manage anger, for others it may be depression or feeling alone. Can you tell me what is going on for you?*

Other key things to keep in mind

When Talking to Students Who Engage in Self-Injury

USE THE STUDENT'S LANGUAGE

Using the terms students use to refer to self-injury can validate their experience by demonstrating that you are actively listening to what they are sharing.

- If the student refers to “my cutting,” then the following: “Can you tell me a bit more about your cutting. I’d like to understand what your cutting does for you.”

VALIDATE THAT SELF-INJURY SERVES A PURPOSE

This tells the student that you are open to understanding their experience and validates their experience.

- *“It sounds like self-injury gives you a sense of relief when you feel really overwhelmed and when you’re in a lot of emotional pain. That sounds like a really difficult experience for you.”*

RECOGNIZE YOUR OWN REACTIONS

Keep in mind that how you respond to someone who self-injures is important. Although some people may have initial strong reactions, and this is often understandable, it is important that responses be calm and understanding. It is important for students to have an opportunity to share their story without feeling pressured.

- If you feel worried about a student, it may not be helpful if your reaction is filled with panic or anxiety.
- Try to be patient and let the conversation unfold, allowing the student time to share their experience with you.

VALIDATE HOW HARD IT CAN BE TO TALK ABOUT SELF-INJURY

It can be incredibly difficult for students to share their experiences. Sometimes, a student’s self-injury is discovered by someone the student knows; in these cases, the student may feel as though there has been a violation or betrayal of their privacy. This should be acknowledged and validated.

- If the student talks to you about self-injury, validate their willingness to do so.
- *For example, you could say “I appreciate that you’re willing to talk to me about this. I am sure it is not easy to do.”*