

Talking to individuals 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 someone 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"I notice you've been a bit agitated/withdrawn/upset (insert concern here) lately and/or I've noticed these marks/cuts/burns (insert method here).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 people 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 someone's experience and may convey that the person 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 could come across as not listening to or hearing what the person has to say. Further, many people are not ready to stop self-injury. This may be especially the case early in conversations about self-injury. Many individuals 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 individuals who engage in self-injury. 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 people self-injure to cope with difficult feelings and experiences. Is this the case for you?*
- *If the individual 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." 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 an individual'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 THEY MAY NOT BE READY TO STOP

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

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

FOCUS ON THE INDIVIDUAL'S OVERALL WELLBEING

Rather than focusing on just the self-injury, it is important to convey concern for the person's overall wellbeing. Self-injury is often a sign of other difficulties. Too much focus on self-injury can also invalidate the individual'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 individuals Who Engage in Self-Injury

USE THE INDIVIDUAL'S LANGUAGE

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

- *If the individual 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 individual 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 individuals to have an opportunity to share their story without feeling pressured. If you feel worried about an individual, it may not be helpful if your reaction is filled with panic or anxiety.

- *If you feel worried about a person, 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 person time to share their experience with you.*

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

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

- *If the person 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."*