

## What Can You Do For A Friend?

If you have a friend who injures themselves, it is natural to feel upset, helpless, and even angry about what your friend is doing. Rather than being frightened, regard it as a way that they use to cope with the difficulties in life. Of course you want your friend to stop the self-injury but you cannot force them to stop. However, you can help by trying to understand how self-injury makes your friend's life easier and being accepting of their felt need to do so.

Encourage your friend to talk and listen sympathetically to the feelings involved. It usually works better to try to maintain a balance in the friendship by sharing your own joys and worries too, as a friendship ceases to be if it is all one way!

Suggest your friend call you if they feel upset or wants to hurt themselves, but in doing so think about your own needs. You may be already over-burdened with your own pressures.

It is important to be able to say 'no' under these circumstances. If the problem starts to overwhelm you, find someone to talk to, preferably someone who is neutral and outside the situation, such as a counselor.

Remember that you are not responsible for your friend's actions. Do not offer more than you can cope with. It is better to offer a little support, which you can sustain, rather than offering a lot and then withdraw it.

You can also come to the Counseling Service and talk about how to help your friend as well as how to look after yourself. We are experienced in dealing with issues of self-harm.

You are welcome to stop by or call to make an appointment:

**131 Van Housen Hall**  
**315-267-2330**  
**8:30-4:30 pm**



THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

**Potsdam**

**SELF-INJURY**

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## **Self-Injury**

Everyone sometimes acts ways that are harmful to their bodies whether it is by drinking, smoking or other excesses. This pamphlet is about the need to inflict injury on oneself in a more deliberate way such as cutting, burning, stabbing, scratching, hair pulling and bruising.

Researchers define self injury (SI) as self-inflicted physical harm severe enough to cause tissue damage or marks that last for several hours, done without suicidal intent or intent to attain sexual pleasure. Such actions are rarely an attempt at suicide or evidence of a severe psychological disorder. Body markings (piercing, tattooing, etc.) that are done as part of a spiritual ritual or for ornamentation purposes generally aren't considered SI.

SI generally is done as a way of coping with overwhelming psycho-physiological arousal. This can be to express emotion, to deal with feelings of unreality or numbness, to make flashbacks stop, to punish the self and stop self-hating thoughts, or to deal with a feeling of impending explosion.

Although cutting is the most common form of SI, burning and head-banging are also very common. Other forms include biting, skin-picking, hair pulling, hitting the body with objects or hitting objects with the body.

Self-injury is more about relieving tension or distress than it is about anything else. SI is a crude, ultimately destructive coping mechanism, but it works and sometimes seems to have addictive qualities.

### **What Makes Someone Want To Hurt Themselves?**

The origin of self-harm often lies in a deep feeling of being powerless, trapped, or without choice. This may come from unhappy experiences in the past or a traumatic event such as being attacked. Current events can bring up old feelings of distress, particularly when life is very stressful, or a person feels isolated and lacking in support or understanding.

### **If You Want Help Because You Injure Yourself...**

Resorting to SI is a way of both indicating that difficulties exist and also that there is an attempt to cope with the problem. Although harming oneself is not a constructive way of dealing with these difficulties, it serves various functions.

It is very important that you care for your injuries with basic first aid: keep cuts clean and wrapped; burns need to be cooled and covered. If you are in any doubt, seek medical help from Health Services or your family doctor.

Perhaps you want to stop hurting yourself but do not know how to begin or realize it will be very hard. It is possible to stop! Even making a little change in the right direction is important; go at your own pace, do as much or as little as you can.

### **How Can You Stop Self-Injury?**

To stop harming yourself may involve both loss and fear. Most people will not understand this, but in stopping you may feel that you risk losing some sense of control, or losing the means to express how you feel.

The more you understand your need to injure yourself, the more likely you are able to make good choices and look after yourself. Initially you may feel afraid that you will not be able to find any good and adequate alternatives.

Talking to a friend, relative or RA about your feelings about self-injury may help, but choose carefully whom you tell. You should be prepared for an emotional even shocked reaction. Ask for what you need, such as to be listened not lectured to; to be treated normally and not repeatedly asked if your O.K.; to be distracted or offered companionship; or even to be given a hug. Talking to a counselor is a good way of getting support while you work on stopping self-injury.

Even if you feel comfortable talking to a relative or friend, you should also consider utilizing professionals, such as a Counseling and Substance Abuse Services counselor or Health Services counselor or Health Services staff.