



A Definition of Self-Injury:

LifeSIGNS sees self-injury as any deliberate, non-suicidal behaviour that inflicts physical harm on someone's own body and is aimed at relieving emotional distress - essentially it is a coping mechanism. Physical pain is often easier to deal with than emotional pain, because it causes 'real' feelings and can be 'seen'. Injuries can prove to an individual that their emotional pain is real and valid.

Self-injury may calm or awaken a person. However, it only provides temporary relief and does not deal with the underlying issues. Self-injury can become a natural response to the stresses of day-to-day life and can escalate in frequency and severity.

LifeSIGNS recognises that self-injury is a way of coping with distressing experiences and difficult emotions; we also appreciate how bewildering self-injurious behaviour may seem you. We encourage people to explore alternatives to self-injury and to come to understand what drives them to hurt themselves, but we never judge a person or tell them what to do.

Types of Self-Injury:

There are various ways in which people injure themselves. Some of the more common methods are as follows:

- Cutting, or scratching
- Banging and bruising limbs
- Burning
- Overdosing on medication without suicidal intent
- Deliberate bone-breaking.

While people can injure any part of their body, arms and legs are frequently cited as the most common places. This is perhaps because they are easily accessible, and can also be hidden easily.

Self-injury can also be known as self-harm. Self-harm might include other behaviours such as eating disorders and alcohol abuse, whereas self-injury usually refers to specifically injurious behaviour such as self-cutting.

Finding out that a friend or member of your family self-injures is not easy. You might feel shocked, angry, hurt, confused, and not know what to do or how to help them.

Self-injury is a very personal experience - what it means to a person, the reasons behind it, and the particular methods used are varied. However, it is nearly always a sign of emotional pain, and must never be written off as attention-seeking behaviour. Although self-injury must be taken seriously, it is not usually a sign of suicidal behaviour, or of 'madness' and for many it is used as a coping mechanism. So first and foremost you must try not to panic.

How you deal with a friend or family member's self-injury will depend on a number of issues – your relationship with them, how old they are, how serious the damage is, what the underlying problems are, whether they are ready to accept help, and what sort of effect it is having on their life.

Here are some useful tips:

- Learn more about self-injury, why people do it, and how to help by visiting www.lifesigns.org.uk and downloading the LifeSIGNS Self-Injury Awareness Booklet.
- Don't take the self-injury personally. It is not aimed at you, and it is not being done to hurt you.
- For some people self-injury does not last for long, but for others it can be a long-term problem. Be prepared for relapses, and don't convey disappointment if someone can't give it up immediately.
- Self-injury is normally a secretive behaviour. Asking someone to show you their injuries, or checking up on them against their will takes away their sense of control, and can be embarrassing.
- Offer support. Be there for them if they want to talk (about anything), but don't put pressure on them. Offer to go with them to see their doctor, but respect their privacy if they do not want you there (whatever their age), or if they do not want to seek help yet
- Let them know that you will be there for them no matter what they do, and whilst you must not condone their self-injury, they need to know that it does not make them a bad person.
- Try not to become over protective. Actions such as removing sharp objects will normally make matters worse. Telling a person to stop self-injuring or giving ultimatums is unreasonable, as it is not that easy.
- It is ok to be angry or sad, but try not to let your friend or family member see that you are angry as this could increase feelings of guilt.
- Don't criticise the person or make them feel that their feelings and behaviour are not valid. It might be worthwhile seeking counselling yourself to deal with your feelings.
- Self-injury is not the only way for people to deal with emotional distress. Try to encourage your friend or family member to seek alternative and more constructive coping mechanisms – some of these can be found in the LifeSIGNS Self-Injury Awareness Booklet.

Whilst most self-injury is not life threatening, and people should not be forced into seeking help until they are ready to, there are times when must you seek medical attention:

- If an injury is serious or an overdose has been taken
- If you believe them to be at severe risk to themselves (i.e. Suicidal) or to others

Remember that self-injury can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality and religion.

LifeSIGNS (Self-Injury Guidance & Network Support) is a UK registered charity (no. 1114661), run by the volunteer directors who have personal experiences with self-injury.

LifeSIGNS aims to support all people who are affected in any way by self-injury in the UK and beyond - including those who self-injure, their family and friends, healthcare professionals, schools and teachers, and anyone with an interest in self-injury.