

WHEN A STUDENT SELF-INJURES

HOW TO RESPOND



RECOGNIZING SELF-INJURY

Self-injury is a strategy people use to manage the weight of overwhelming emotions. Negative emotions related to poor self-image, rejection, loneliness, betrayal, or confusion over identity and belonging can be too much for teenagers to deal with, leading some to look for ways to escape stress, even temporarily. Shame and fear of exposure both contribute to the deliberate secrecy most self-injurers practice. Often friends and family have no idea that their loved one chooses to self-injure.

Cutting is the most common form of self-injury, but people may use other methods of self-injury, such as:

- Scratching
- Pinching
- Punching hard objects (like walls)
- Hitting oneself (with a fist or object)
- Burning (with fire or rubbing burns such as with a pencil eraser)
- Head-banging (against a wall) or hair-pulling
- Tearing open skin, scabs, or scars

RESPONDING TO SELF-INJURY

Helping a student, their peers, their parents, and other adults in their life through an experience of self-injury is trying and difficult. However, it's something you may need to respond to during a trip or event with your students. How you respond matters, so consider taking these steps:

PRAY Take a quick moment to pray. The Holy Spirit already knows what the student is going through and the best way for you to respond. Lean on God and ask for wisdom before you proceed.

SEPARATE It is usually helpful to get the student away from the group to talk, as they may be embarrassed by what they're going through. At times, they may want to bring a close friend or someone they feel comfortable with for support.

LISTEN When you sense the teen is ready to talk, ask some open-ended questions to help them verbalize what they are feeling, such as:

- It seems like you're having a hard time. Can you help me understand what's going on?
- What three emotions are you feeling?
- When you feel those feelings, what positive things help you?
- In what way does your self-injury help you?

Pro-Tip: Never promise a student that you will keep their secret. Instead, promise that if you must tell someone, you will do so with their knowledge.

These questions will help give you some direction for your plan. Be patient – take time to let the student process their feelings and tell you what they need. After spending time listening and planning with the student, remind them that weapons aren't allowed on the trip/at the event/etc., and ask them to turn over any implements of self-injury.

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PLAN Work with the student and your staff members to identify what the teen needs. Their needs could be simple, such as having an adult check in with them periodically so that they can talk through their feelings. Or something more drastic might be helpful, such as having an augmented schedule to avoid triggers, or even leaving the event or trip early.

As part of your plan, be sure to check the legal reporting requirements both with local government officials and your church or group's leadership. This is critical, and necessary, to make sure everyone involved is fully aware of what must be communicated and to whom.

COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS Inform and involve the parents/guardians about the problem with wisdom and deliberate consideration. Each teen's life and family situation are unique, so consider the potential reaction of parents/guardians before reaching out. There is the possibility that informing the parents could initially create more severe problems, especially if the teen comes from a dysfunctional home with ongoing relationship stress with parents. Many parents see cutting and self-injury as a life-threatening problem and react as such. Their reactions of fear, shock, and anger can drive the teen deeper into self-protection and self-reliance.

As much as you can, help parents/guardians...

- Provide unconditional love and support without judgment.
- Focus on underlying problems, rather than the self-injury.
- Support alternative coping strategies for their teen.
- Accept that what the teens is experiencing is real and that self-injury is helping them solve a problem.
- Celebrate their teen's successes.

Although addressing self-injury might create a crisis, with care, support, and wise counsel it could also become a unique opportunity to build community and help a family deepen their understanding of true freedom in Christ.

This resource was adapted from a guidebook created in partnership with TreeHouse. TreeHouse is on a mission to unleash hope in teens everywhere. Learn more at treehousehope.org.