

How Families Can Handle Disclosure of Self-Harm

When parents are finally 'let in' to their child's secret, they often have feelings similar to grief and loss reactions, including:

Disbelief denial anger fear and anxiety helplessness guilt

These feelings often occur along with other strong emotions such as:

Embarrassment failure shame powerlessness disgust

If you are in this situation, it is important to give yourself permission to feel any emotion that comes up as no emotion is 'wrong'. Also, accepting your emotions is a good way to model healthy reactions for your child.^[4] However, it is also important not to act based on these first reactions, but to take time to process strong emotions (away from your child) and then come back and build a collaborative plan of action with your child.

It is also important to understand that no one is to 'blame' in this situation. You may benefit from seeking professional help and support to deal with your own feelings, and how best to manage what is going on for you and your family.

What can parents do? An issue as complex as self-injury cannot be adequately covered in an article such as this. The most important messages we want to give you here is:

- DON'T IGNORE the behavior, and
- DON'T PANIC - self-injury CAN be treated

Seek professional help: Because of the complexity of self-injuring behavior, it can be very helpful to seek professional assistance to work out why your child is self-injuring and how you can support them. You may also need help coming to terms with what's happening prior to or while you are supporting your child. Speaking with a professional can help you understand your own emotions as well as develop a plan of action for supporting the young person.

Current research indicates that Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is an effective way of treating self-injuring behavior. It teaches how to identify and challenge faulty and rigid thinking, and change the resulting unhealthy behaviors.

There are also many books about self-injury written for parents or caregivers that can provide further information on seeking help for your child, you and your family. See the listings at the end of this article to find out where you can go for further help and information.

Offer support to your child: Let your child know that you want to help them in the best way you can. Tell them you have trust that, with professional assistance, they will be able to find better ways to cope with the overwhelming emotions driving their behavior. Avoid telling your child to 'just stop it', as self-injury can be addictive and research tells us that people with addictive behaviors are unable to stop without extended periods of support.

Show belief and understanding: Tell your child that you believe in their capacity to work towards finding alternative healthy coping strategies. This will help give them the space to feel some control in the short-term - that their coping mechanism will not be 'taken from them before they are ready' - while at the same time assisting them to feel reassured by your confidence that hope lies ahead.

It is also important for your child to know that you understand and validate the emotions driving their behaviors but that you also know there are more constructive and helpful ways to process those feelings.

It is critical that you persist in letting them know that you trust and support them to find a way through this experience, no matter how long it takes and no matter how many set-backs there are along the way. If your child believes that you trust in them, they will more readily trust in themselves to find a way through.