



## **What Should I do if a Teen is Self-injuring/Cutting?**

Self-injury is the act of deliberately harming the body, such as cutting or burning. It is not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, self-injury is an unhealthy way to cope with emotional pain. It is an act of anger and an act of self medication.

If a teen is self-injuring, you may not know what to do. You may be shocked and scared. Use a compassionate but firm approach to helping a teen alleviate this harmful behavior. Try not to judge or criticize. Criticism may increase the risk of self-injuring behavior. Let the teen know you care about him or her even if they have self injurious behavior that you do not understand. Parents who discover their teen is cutting typically are shocked and immediately blame themselves for failing as a parent. Therapists say that parental self-blame is NOT helpful.

Remember, cutting is a behavioral sign of a deeper underlying problem. The main goal should not be to get the teen to "stop cutting," but to treat the deeper problem so the teen develops more mature coping skills and no longer feels the need to self-injure as a way of coping. Understanding and compassion for the deeper feelings and struggles instead of blaming or shaming the behavior will help the teen deal with life without self-injurious behavior.

### **Tips for dealing with this serious issue:**

#### **Don't**

- React with anger or shaming comments.
- Blame yourself. Don't say "What did I do wrong as a mother/father for you to do this to yourself."
- Blame the teen. Don't ask "Why are you doing this to yourself?"
- Go into denial about the problem.
- Assume this is a "phase" the teen will outgrow.

#### **Do**

- Admit the teen needs help. This may include help for the parents as well.
- Immediately seek treatment for the teen with someone who specializes in treatment of self injurious behavior.
- Provide time for the teen to discuss problems or worries.
- Be consistent in providing verbal reassurance and security.
- Be completely supportive of the teen's struggles and feelings. Be patient.
- Offer positive affirmations of self worth.
- Demonstrate healthy conflict resolution and flexibility.
- Avoid role reversal (letting the teen become the adult) by being calmly authoritative.
- Take the problem very seriously. This is not just attention-seeking behavior.

Understand that treatment probably won't simply be a matter of medication and/or a few visits with a therapist. Treatment often includes medication along with individual and family therapy over a sustained period of time. It also usually includes DBT (Dialectical Behavior Therapy) group treatment. Don't assume that the teen is "okay" once he or she is in treatment and making progress. As with treatment for any destructive habit, setbacks are not uncommon. Some teens report cutting episodes even after a year of therapy, although episodes typically become less and less frequent the longer a teen is in treatment.