

## **Self-Injury and Youth - General Guidelines for Parents\***

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

- Self-injury (SI) is a complex behavior, separate and distinct from suicide.
- Self-injury provides a way to manage overwhelming feelings and can be a way to bond with peers (rite of togetherness).
- SI is defined as intentional tissue damage that can include cutting, severe scratching, pinching, stabbing, puncturing, ripping or pulling skin or hair and burning.
- The majority of students who engage in SI are adolescent females, though research indicates that there are minimal gender differences. Students of all ages and socio economic backgrounds engage in SI behavior, as it is commonly mentioned in media, social networks and other means of communication.
- Individual mental health services can be effective when focused on reducing the negative thoughts and environmental factors that trigger SI.
- Tattoos and body piercing are not usually considered self-injurious behaviors, unless they are done with the intention to hurt the body.

### **SIGNS OF SELF-INJURY**

- Frequent or unexplained bruises, scars, cuts, or burns.
- Frequent inappropriate use of clothing designed to conceal wounds (often found on the arms, thighs or abdomen).
- Unwillingness to participate in activities that require less body coverage (swimming, physical education class).
- Secretive behaviors, spending unusual amounts of time in the bedroom, bathroom or isolated areas.
- Bruises on the neck, headaches, red eyes, ropes/clothing/belts tied in knots (signs of the “choking game”).
- General signs of depression, social-emotional isolation and disconnectedness.
- Possession of sharp implements (razor blades, shards of glass, thumb tacks).
- Evidence of self-injury in drawings, journals, pictures, texts, and social networking sites.
- Risk taking behaviors such as gun play, sexual acting out, jumping from high places or running into traffic.

**LA COUNTY RESOURCE**  
**877.7.CRISIS or 877.727.4747**  
**Suicide Prevention Center**

**NATIONAL RESOURCE**  
**800.273.TALK (8255)**  
**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS**

### **LISTEN**

- Address the behavior as soon as possible by asking open questions and listening to what they say and how they act.
- Talk to your son/daughter with compassion, calm and caring.
- Understand that this is his/her way of coping with pain.

### **PROTECT**

- Foster a protective home environment by maintaining structure, stability, and consistency.
- Maintain high expectations for behavior and achievement.
- Set limits and provide supervision and consistency to encourage successful outcomes.
- Provide firm guidelines and set limits around technology usage.
- Be cautious about giving out punishments or negative consequences as a result of the SI behavior, as these may inadvertently encourage the behavior to continue.

### **CONNECT**

- Check in with your child on a regular basis.
- Become familiar with the support services at your child's school. Contact appropriate person(s) at the school, for example, the school social worker, school psychologist, school counselor, or school nurse.

### **MODEL**

- Model healthy and safe ways of managing stress and engage your child in these activities, such as taking walks, deep breathing, journal writing, or listening to music.
- Be aware of your thoughts, feelings and reactions about this behavior. Lecturing, expressing anger or shock can cause your child to feel guilt or shame.

### **TEACH**

- Teach about normal changes that can occur when experiencing stressful events.
- Teach your child about common reactions to stress and help them identify alternative ways to cope.
- Teach your child help seeking behaviors and help them identify adults they can trust at home and at school when they need assistance.

### **\*REFERENCES**

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