

A Guide to Understanding Self-Injury for Those Who Self-Injure



What is Non-Suicidal Self-Injury?

Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), also referred to as self-injury or self-harm, is the deliberate and direct destruction of one's body tissue without suicidal intent and not for body modification purposes. Therefore, this definition does not include tattooing or piercing, or indirect injury such as substance abuse and eating disorders.

This type of self-injury is different than "self-injurious behaviours" (SIB) which are commonly seen among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Many people who self-injure feel alone and isolated. It is important to know that you are not alone. Self-injury is not uncommon, with around 25% percent of adolescents and young adults reporting that they have self-injured at least once and many of these have done it multiple times.

Fast Facts:

- While others often want to know "Why do you do this?", it is often difficult to really give one simple reason.
- If you self-injure, it does not mean there is something seriously wrong with you, but it usually does mean that you are struggling and could use some support.
- Although it may seem like you can't overcome self-injury, it is important to keep in mind that people do recover.
- Many people who self-injure report that the more they do it the harder it is to stop. They tell us that it feels like the self-injury has taken over their life.
- Up to 25% of youth and young adults have self-injured at least once. One quarter of these have done it many times. You are NOT alone.



Why is Getting Help Important?

Many people who self-injure report that the more they do it, the harder it is to stop. They tell us that it feels like the self-injury has taken over their life. Self-injury is not a life-sentence, and people can and do stop self-injuring. However, the longer a person self-injures, the more difficult it can be to stop. Some people who used to self-injure have found healthier ways to cope and stopped self-injuring. Some have done this on their own, while others have done it with the support of a professional.

In either case it is important to remember that learning new, healthier ways to cope takes time and effort. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't happen right away or if you find it difficult; many people experience this.

There are people who can support you and this may include your family, loved ones and friends – and we encourage you to reach out to someone you can share this with. It is hard to stop self-injuring — but you can stop.



Is there Something Seriously Wrong with Me? Am I crazy?

Self-injury is often misunderstood. Some people who hurt themselves may struggle with depression, anxiety, perfectionism, traumatic life experiences or an eating disorder. Others may have none of these difficulties.

Self-injuring does not make you crazy. If you self-injure, it does not mean there is something seriously wrong with you, but it usually does mean that you are struggling and could use some support.

Why am I Self-Injuring?

The most common reason for self-injury is to cope with difficult feelings (e.g., distress, anxiety, stress, sadness). These feelings or thoughts are felt to be so intense and overwhelming that they are intolerable. While it may not be a healthy way to cope, hurting yourself may make you feel better temporarily. This is why the behaviour is so difficult to stop.

You may self-injure to punish yourself if you feel you have done something wrong (even though you may not have actually done anything wrong), or because you feel you have not measured up in some way to your own standards, even though these may be harsh and unrealistic.

You may self-injure to tell others how you feel (when it is hard to say it in words). You may self-injure to communicate to someone close to you or the world about your suffering or pain.

Self-injury can also happen when you feel disconnected from others or even yourself; it may be used to make you feel something, even if it is pain or to reach out to others.

If you have suicidal thoughts or urges, you may self-injure to avoid acting on these.

If none of these reasons sound like they fit for you, there may be other reasons why you self-injure. Everyone has their own reason for engaging in self-injury. Many people say that several of these reasons are true for them, and these reasons can change over time. It is complicated and while others often want to know “Why do you do this?”, it is sometimes difficult to really give one simple reason.



How Do I Know If I Need Help?

Although many people who self-injure say that the self-injury has ‘taken over’ and they know they need help, others who self-injure feel like they can control the behaviour on their own, or stop injuring whenever they want.

In either case, hurting yourself is a sign that things are difficult for you. It is a sign that you are not coping well, and that you need to find better ways to cope. Even if you are injuring only sometimes, this suggests that you are having some difficulties with strong emotions and/or communicating with others. Because of this, you might find that getting support is helpful.

How Do I Tell Others I am Self-Injuring?

It is common to feel like nobody understands your self-injury. Thinking about telling someone else about your behaviour may feel scary, intimidating and/or impossible. Different things may help with some of these worries. Below are some suggestions that may help you feel safer sharing your self-injury with someone else.

1. Identify someone you trust. This may be a parent, aunt, uncle, best friend, teacher, romantic partner or anybody in your life. There is no right answer about WHO can support you best.
2. Write down your story. Sometimes writing how you started self-injuring and what your experience has been like can help you to share it with someone else. This is especially true if you have a hard time talking about your feelings.
3. If you are a teenager and choose to tell a close friend, it is important for your friend to tell an adult. While it may feel like your friend can help you through this, they cannot do it alone. Remember, they are telling an adult because they care about you, not because they aren't a good friend. This can be hard to see in the moment; but it is important for you to get the support you need and while a friend can be understanding, they can't do it all alone.
4. Another thing that can be helpful when telling others about your self-injury is to share the General Information Booklet from our site. You can either print out or send a link to someone; it can be helpful for that person to learn more about self-injury in order to better understand it.



What if There Is No One To Tell?

If you feel like there is nobody in your life who you can tell about self-injury, there are many resources available that can help. You are never alone, and are urged to contact a doctor, a counsellor, psychologist or a help line in your area if you feel like there is nobody else you trust to help you. You can refer to the resources below for places that may be helpful to you, as well.



Where Can I Find More Information?

There is a growing selection of tools and guides available online to help those who self-injure, their loved ones and the professionals who are working with them. Here are some places we recommend:

The Mental Health Foundation in New Zealand offers online factsheet with advice about self-care and supporting others, and links to other resources and help services.
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/resource/49/self-harm>

Common Ground – a short guide for parents, families and friends of teenagers:
<http://www.commonground.org.nz/common-issues/the-hard-stuff/self-harm/>

Youthline provides real-time 24/7 free phone, text, email and online counselling to support young people who are self-harming – and can also provide this support for parents and family. Free phone 24/7: 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email talk@youthline.co.nz
<https://www.youthline.co.nz/self-harm.html>

Lifeline provides real-time 24/7 free phone, text, email and online counselling to support young people who are self-harming – and can also provide this support for parents and family. Free phone 24/7: 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE)

Often, self-injury is used to cope with overwhelming negative feelings and/or thoughts. To help with these feelings and thoughts, here are a number of coping strategies (for in the moment, day-to-day, and in general), that you may find useful.





Can I Stop Self-Injuring?

Self-injury is not a life-sentence. People CAN and DO STOP self-injuring, you can too. However, the longer you self-injure, the more difficult it can be to stop. It is important to remember that stopping a behaviour that has become a frequently used unhealthy coping strategy will take time and effort and having support in doing this would be helpful.

Many people who self-injure do it in private and work very hard to keep it a secret. In these cases, the self-injury may sometimes be accidentally discovered. Some people who self-injure will tell one or two close friends or family members; often they will tell others who self-injure when they're online. Other people who self-injure will talk to a professional (like a counsellor, psychologist or a doctor) about their self-injury.

It is important that people who self-injure are provided with helpful resources.

Mental health professionals (such as counsellors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists) are trained to help people learn healthier ways to cope and can be helpful in supporting someone who self-injures.

Some people who self-injure are not ready and/or willing to seek professional help. It is possible to learn healthier ways to cope without a professional but it may be extremely difficult. People who self-injure cannot be forced to stop. Sometimes people who self-injure do not want to stop self-injuring.

Remember that self-injury serves a purpose and stopping can be difficult. When people who self-injure start learning healthy ways to cope, then they find stopping self-injury easier.

Note about disclosing: Although you want others to react with empathy, understanding, and kindness, this may not always happen right away. Sometimes when people really care about you they can react in ways that may be upsetting and which seem unhelpful. This may be because they don't understand self-injury, find it scary, and do not know what to say or do. They may need some time to understand what you're going through and how to support you best.



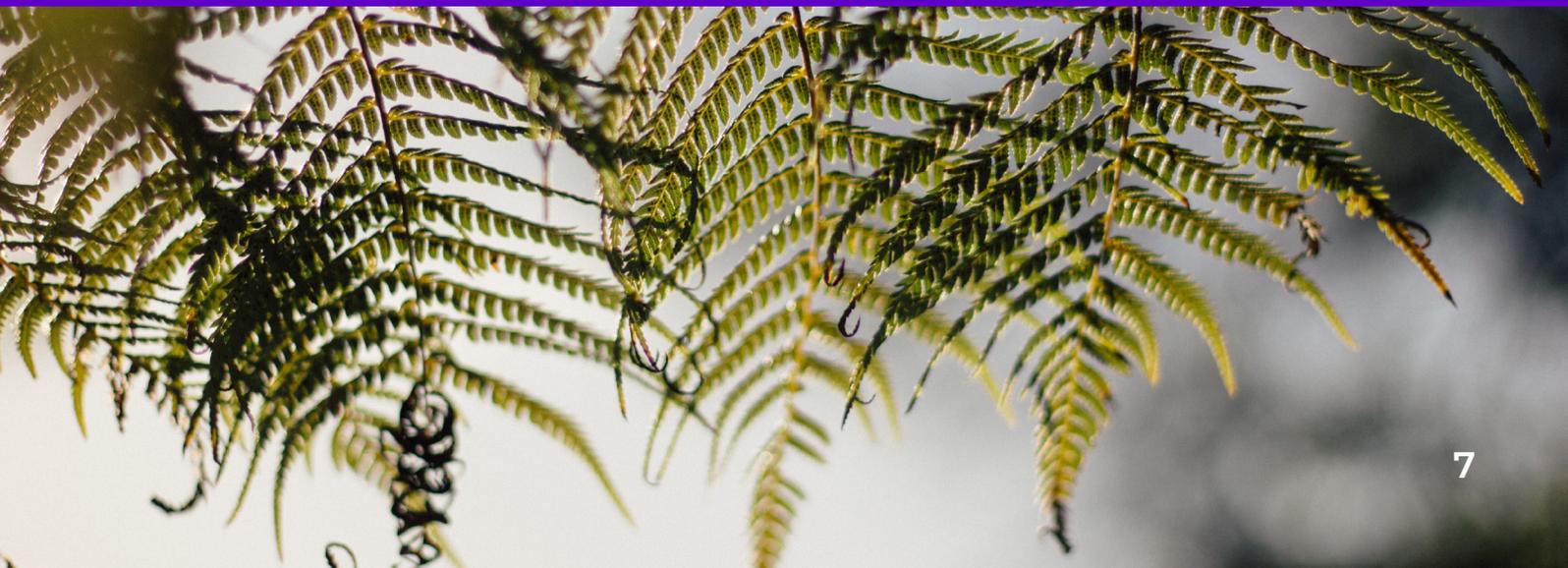


What are the Keys to Recovery?

In general, research has shown that people who learn healthier ways of coping and who stop self-injuring have done so using one or more of the following key pieces — in either formal treatment or on their own with some other form of support:

- Learning about self-injury, getting information from reliable sources to better understand your self-injury
- Being really motivated to recover, seeing clearly how the self-injury is negatively affecting your life, seeing the clear benefits to stopping (for yourself) and believing that it is possible.
- Having at least a few people who know about your efforts to recover, and who are supportive (and know how to support you).
- Working through resources or with a professional to get the skills to manage urges, developing healthy alternative coping skills to replace self-injury, and tolerating/coping with intense emotions.
- Learning how to express emotions and problem solve.
- Developing a new identity as someone who has overcome self-injury.

Remember, if you do self-injure, you're not alone. Although it may seem like you can't overcome self-injury, it is important to keep in mind that people do recover. It will take some effort but in our experience, people who recover from self-injure say that it was worth it.





Acknowledgement

This resource was adapted from materials created at McGill University and the University of Guelph, by their expert teams of researchers and practitioners. To see more about them and their world-class work, go to www.sioutreach.com



Disclaimer: All information in this guide is provided for information and education purposes only. The information is not intended to substitute the advice of a mental health professional. You should always consult your doctor for specific information on personal health matters, or other relevant professionals to ensure that your own circumstances are considered.

Please feel free to download and share this resource where it can support a person or their family experiencing self-injurious behaviours.