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Ideas for Supporting Someone who Uses Self-Harm

from people who
have used self-harm

What Is Self-Harm

Self-harm means hurting yourself in an intentional way. It is sometimes called self-injury, self-inflicted violence, or self-mutilation.

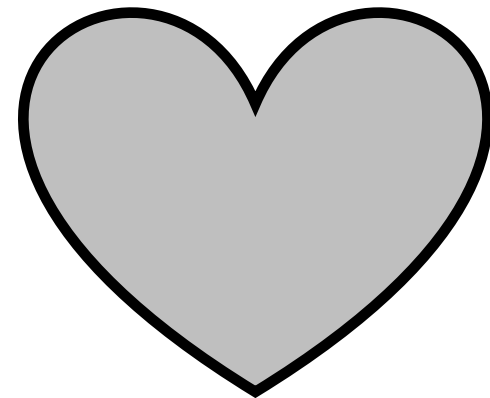
Self-harm is common. It can include actions like cutting, biting, burning, or hitting oneself, getting into fights where you're likely to get hurt, driving in a way that is intentionally reckless, or ingesting substances that you know are harmful.

People use self-harm for many reasons, including:

- to distract from or relieve emotional pain
- to express emotional pain in a visible way
- to feel a sense of control
- to punish oneself
- to feel more physically present
- to help oneself mentally check out
- to avoid hurting oneself in a more harmful way

It can be scary when someone you know uses self-harm. It may be helpful to think about self-harm as an attempt to manage difficult feelings or situations.

Your Thoughts & Ideas



Taking Care of Yourself

It's important to think about your own needs and limits while supporting someone else.

Make sure you're taking care of your own basic needs, like eating and sleeping. You may also want to try some self-care activities like:

- going for a walk
- playing a game
- listening to music
- doing yoga or meditation
- cuddling your pet
- hitting a punching bag
- going to a support group
- any other thing you find restorative!

When you're supporting someone who uses self-harm, you may feel the need to get your own support. That's understandable!

Do try to use discretion and avoid sharing details that the person you are supporting has shared with you, especially if you are getting support from someone who knows the person.

What Helps with Self-Harm

Self-harm can be a really effective coping tool for people, so expecting someone to simply stop using self-harm is often not realistic.

Here are some tools that may be helpful for the person you are supporting:

- **Finding ways to reduce the harm when using self-harm.** For example, a harm reduction approach for people who cut themselves could include having bandages and ointment on hand.
- **Substituting another action for the self-harm.** For example, someone who hits themselves could find punching a pillow or punching bag to be a good substitution.
- **Distracting oneself when thinking about self-harm.** For example, doing a craft activity or going for a bike ride may be a good distraction for someone.
- **Finding ways to explore and move past the underlying thoughts and feelings that lead to self-harm.** Good self-care, taking care of one's physical wellness, and getting support through friends and family, peer supporters, or mental health providers may be part of the journey.

Deciding what is helpful for moving past self-harm should always be the decision of the person who is using self-harm.

What Doesn't Help

Some things that generally are not helpful:

- presuming that you know why someone uses self-harm
- expecting that someone will (or can or wants to) immediately stop using self-harm
- making self-harm the focus of your relationship with the person
- body checks to ensure that someone is not using self-harm *
- safety contracts where someone pledges to not use self-harm or there are consequences when they do use it *
- coercing or forcing someone to engage in treatment
- anything the person who is using self-harm thinks is not helpful

* unless the person has identified this as being helpful and they have requested it

What You Can Do

People often have a strong reaction to someone else's self-harm. It can be hard to know what to say or how to say it.

When someone you know may be using self-harm, acknowledging what you noticed in a direct but gentle way and offering your support can be a good place to start. For example, you could say “I noticed your [bandage, scar, wound]. I'm here to talk, if you would like.”

If they don't want to talk, leave it at that. Self-harm is a very personal experience, and some people will not feel comfortable talking about it. Respect that.

If they do want to talk, you can ask open-ended questions:

- what happen?
- have you done this before?
- what would be helpful right now?
- what can I do to support you?

Then listen!