

REACHING AND HELPING YOUTH WHO SELF-INJURE (SI) SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

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from See My Pain: Creative Strategies and *Activities for Helping Young People Who Self-Injure*
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Teachers have many more responsibilities today than they did years ago. If you are a teacher I'm sure you would agree that it wasn't the same ten years ago when schools could focus more on teaching and not dealing with all the other problems that are in today's classroom. It is virtually impossible for teachers to discern which students have psychological problems, know the red flags of a student with hidden rage, or know which students are on medication and the side effects. In addition, some teachers are expected to know how to handle tragedies such as a terrorist attack, school shooting, or suicide. Faced with many of these concerns, teachers are still receiving limited training in how to effectively handle these challenges. SI is now another growing problem to add to that list. Many teachers have not been trained in SI and do not know how they should handle a student who shows signs of this behavior. Often students will come to a teacher that he/she trusts and either tell the teacher about the SI behavior, or show where on their body he/she self-injured.

It is important for teachers to know the Do's and Don'ts of how to handle such situations. Teachers need to know that in following these suggestions, they cannot stop the SI and they need to refer any student who they suspect of this behavior to the school guidance counselor, school social worker, or the school nurse. The following Do's and Don'ts are suggestions for helping teachers respond to any student they think may be involved in self-injurious behavior.

Do

- Try to approach the student in a calm and caring way
- Accept him/her even though you do not accept the behavior
- Let the student know how much you care about him/her and believe in his/her potential
- Understand that this is his/her way of coping with the pain that he/she feels inside
- Refer that student to your school's counselor, social worker, and/or nurse
- Offer to go with that student to see the professional helper
- Listen! Allow the student to talk to you. Be available.
- Discover what the student's personal strengths are and encourage him/her to use those strengths
- Help him/her get involved in some area of interest, a club, sport, peer program, outreach project, e.g., volunteer at a local animal shelter or wildlife sanctuary, help an older person at a nursing home, tutor a young child after school, or mentor a child with low self-esteem

Don't

- Say or do anything to cause the student to feel guilt or shame (e.g., "What did you do to yourself?", "Why did you do that?")
- Act shocked or appalled by his/her behavior
- Talk about their SI in front of the class or around his/her peers
- Try to teach him/her what you think he/she should do
- Judge the student even if you do not agree with him/her
- Tell the student that you won't tell anyone if he/she shares self-harming behaviors with you
- Use punishment or negative consequences if a student does SI
- Make deals in an effort to get the student to stop SI
- Make promises to the student that you can't keep

Don't

- Say or do anything to cause guilt or shame (e.g., "Why would you do such a thing?", "How could you?")
- Act shocked or appalled by his/her behavior
- Talk about his/her SI in front of friends or with other relatives
- Try to teach them what you think they should do
- Use punishment or negative consequences when he/she SI. (The reason he/she feels the need to SI is because he/she is hurting emotionally about someone or something).
- Overprotect by monitoring every move he/she makes, but do notice what's going on
- Deny that your child is self-injuring as a way of coping
- Keep your child from seeing friends, but monitor who he/she does see
- Blame yourself for your child's behavior
- Conduct room searches. They produce resentment (Walsh)
- Minimize SI by saying "you're just doing it for attention" or "it's just a fad" (Walsh)

WEBSITES RELATED TO SELF-INJURY*

There are scores of websites that focus on self-injury. They fall into two main categories: 1) websites designed by professionals to assist self-injurers, and 2) websites created by self-injurers intended to offer peer support. This list is meant to be representative, not exhaustive.

Self-Injury and Related Issues (SIARI): www.siari.co.uk

S.A.F.E. Alternatives: www.selfinjury.com

American Self-Harm Information Clearinghouse: www.selfinjury.org

There is No Shame Here: <http://www.palace.net/~llama/psych/injury.html>

Self-Injury: <http://www.mirror-mirror.org/selfinj.htm>

Self-Injury Guidance and Network Support: <http://www.lifesigns.org.uk>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Bowman, Susan, & Randall, Kaye. See My Pain! Creative Strategies and Activities for Helping Young People Who Self-Injure. Chapin, SC: YouthLight, Inc., 2005. To order go to www.youthlightbooks.com.

Lieberman, Richard (2004). Understanding and Responding to Students Who Self-Mutilate. Principal Leadership. 4(7). National Association of Secondary School Principals. This complete article can be accessed at http://naspcenter.org/principals/nassp_cutting.html

Walsh, Barent. Treating Self-Injury: A Practical Guide. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 2005. To order go to www.amazon.com

*Thanks to Barry Walsh for providing these useful resources