Information on Self-Harm and Self-Injury

It is important to be approachable and willing to discuss self-harm and self-injury with your student. Below is a description of self-injury, reasons individuals may self-injure, warning signs, and how to help.

What is Self-Harm/Self-Injury?

- Self-injury is known as self-harm or self-injurious behavior and refers to the intentional self-infliction of wounds to the skin without the intent to die.
- Examples can include cutting, burning, hitting, picking, hair pulling, choking, and head banging. The most common form of self-injurious behavior is cutting.
- Individuals who self-harm often engage in the behavior repeatedly in a secretive manner.
- Those who self-injure are typically NOT suicidal. Self-harm is a negative coping strategy.

Why Individuals Self-Injure

- To avoid overwhelming or difficult feelings
- To cope with conflicts or disconnection in relationships.
- To attempt to feel something, instead of feeling emotionally or physically numb.
- To attempt to gain control over a situation.
- Overall, self-injury is a warning sign your student may be experiencing symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, or other psychological challenges.
**Warning Signs of Self-Harm**

A sense of shame and secrecy often goes along with self-injury. Most teens who self-harm hide the marks and if they’re noticed, make up excuses about them.

- Unexplained wounds, scars, cuts, and/or bruises.
- Frequent “accidents” in order to explain injuries.
  - “The cat scratched me” or “I burned myself on the oven”
- Covering up or wearing clothing that is inappropriate for the weather, such as long sleeves or long pants in hot weather.
- Unexplained stains on clothing, towels, or bedding.
- Sharp objects or cutting instruments in the person’s possession. This can also include items that could be used to burn one’s skin.
- General signs of depression including isolation, irritability, hopelessness, and disconnection from support systems.
- Discussions or posts about self-injury on social media.

**Myths and Facts**

**Myth:** People who self-injure are trying to get attention.

**FACT:** People who self-harm generally do so in secret. They are struggling with powerful emotions that are difficult to regulate. Other times, people openly show or talk about their self-harm. Self-injury is a way for the individual to cope with these feelings and should ALWAYS be viewed as a cry for help.

**Myth:** Self-injury is just a fad. Ignore it and kids will grow out of it.

**FACT:** Self-injury should not be minimized or referred to as a “fad”; there is no evidence that individuals spontaneously “grow out of it.” Self-injury involves real tissue damage and potential scarring. It is indicative of serious distress that requires assessment and treatment by a mental health professional.

There are multiple reasons why people self-harm. We need to ask ourselves, “what need is not being met to the point where this person feels they need to self-harm?”

**Myth:** Self-injury is not a problem in our school.

**FACT:** Based on an emerging body of research, experimentation with self-injury is occurring at high rates in many middle and high schools throughout the United States. Most schools report some type of self-injury among their students. Students are facing an increasing number of life stressors such as academics, higher levels of responsibility, and bullying in schools.
### How to Respond to Self-Injury

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<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
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<td>LISTEN to your child.</td>
<td>Agree to keep self-injury behavior a secret or ignore it. This is a cry for help and safety is never worth keeping a secret.</td>
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<td>Let your child know how much you love and support them.</td>
<td>Use punishment or negative consequences when your child self-injures.</td>
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<td>Understand that this is your child’s way of coping.</td>
<td>Overreact, say or do anything to cause shame or guilt. This can discourage open conversation</td>
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<td>Encourage substitute behaviors that focus on stress reduction and healthy &amp; safe coping strategies i.e. journaling, exercise, listening to music.</td>
<td>Reward or bribe your child (ex: going out to lunch, going shopping) as an incentive to stop self-injury. This can reinforce the behavior.</td>
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<td>Encourage participation in extracurricular activities and clubs to increase social connection and support.</td>
<td>Attempt to make deals or contracts to stop self-injury. This can discourage openness and honesty from your student.</td>
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<td>Be aware of what your child is posting or reading on social media, i.e. text messages and posts. Openly monitor and discuss effects of social media.</td>
<td>Agree that your child can keep their communications on social media/texts “confidential.” Safety is never worth keeping a secret!</td>
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<td>Seek support from a medical or mental health professional.</td>
<td>Feel like you need to support your child on your own.</td>
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### Who to Talk to if You’re Concerned

- Talk with school staff, including the School Counselor, Principal, or Vice Principal or reach out to therapist, doctor, or other Health Care Professional to discuss options.
- Access and Crisis Line: 1-888-724-7240. Available 7 days a week/24 hours a day.
- Text “Home” to the Crisis Text line at 741-741
- Emergencies: Dial 911 or your local Sheriff’s Office and ask for PERT (Psychiatric Emergency Response Team). PERT provides clinical support to law enforcement and the community for calls involving persons having a mental health crisis.