



The Cornell Research Program
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

Family Policies

Safety Concerns and Contracts

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“Should I take her bedroom door off its hinges?”

“Should I take all of the knives out of the house?”

These are some of the questions we commonly receive from parents once they learn their child is self-injuring. As a parent, your instinct is to do whatever you can to protect your child from harm. Physical harm – even self-inflicted – is something parents are hardwired to prevent. This means parents sometimes jump to extremes such as taking doors off hinges to reduce privacy, removing all knives, scissors, and razor blades from the house so there are no implements to injure with, or never leaving their child alone. While all of these impulses are understandable, it is most helpful to pause for a moment and reflect on not only the practicality of making these changes, but about whether or not they are helpful for your child.

For many who engage in the behavior, self-injury is about *control*. It is a way of regaining a sense of emotional control and of bringing a sense of normalcy to oneself in moments that may otherwise feel completely out of control. People who self-injure tend to turn to it when they see it as the quickest and easiest route to self-soothing in moments of emotional distress or turmoil. Taking away all privacy or access to normal household items may actually *increase* this out-of-control feeling rather than make it better.

It is also important to consider your intentions. Give yourself permission to have these feelings but also think about your deeper intentions. If you want to be an ally for your child, you need to think about how to best show this in a way that is helpful to you both. Keep in mind that a major aspect of recovery from self-injury is being able to live and function in normal environments and most normal household environments include scissors, knives, etc. Even if you are able to temporarily remove all potential threats, your child will eventually need to learn to be and live in environments that include these things (and wouldn't it be handy to have a kitchen knife around when you're making dinner?)

In addition, people desperate to self-injure do not need specific tools or places to engage in the behavior – a variety of things you would not think to remove (e.g. staples from magazines) and things you cannot remove (fingernails) can be used to self-injure. Moreover, when really desperate to self-injure, a person will do it anywhere, even if this means others can see them do it.

This being said, our recommendation is that you use your desire to limit your child's access to self-injury tools or places to self-injure as the starting point for conversation. You can honestly share your feelings and talk about why you feel the need to limit access to self-injury. Asking your child to also share his or her perceptions will likely provide you with insights and even some surprises. Some young people on the road to recovery find some limitations

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useful – having someone help restrict their ability to act on self-injurious urges might give them enough time to consider and try alternative coping methods in times of distress. Other young people may resent the suggestion that you could or should control this aspect of their lives. In either case, when discussed at the right time (that is, when you are both calm and have the time for a conversation), this topic can be an opportunity to come to agreement about limits that you are both comfortable with and to work together to identify supports that would be useful **to both of you** during the recovery process.

No-Harm Contracts

Parents may also consider requiring their child sign a “no-harm contract” (or enter into a similar verbal agreement), in which the child promises he or she will not self-injure. Clinicians working with self-injurious clients differ on their support for this kind of contract and youth who self-injure also have mixed responses to the idea.

For example, one self-injurious youth we talked with spoke about how it was useful for him to know that his father was going to ask if he had self-injured on a weekly basis. While this was not a formal contract or agreement, this on-going accountability to his father helped him in times of distress to keep the longer term goal of ceasing to self-injure in mind. On the other hand, reports from youth in familial or clinical settings where they felt coerced into signing no-harm contracts have described intense feelings of shame and guilt when they have a self-injury slip. In some cases, these feelings were so strong it led to them to not only hide their self-injury slip from their parents or clinicians, but caused them to further build a psychological wall between them and their caregivers.

Benefits of No-Harm Contracts

The benefits of no-harm contracts include: a) conveying a sense of responsibility and agency that underscores the seriousness of the issue and may increase the commitment level and sense of responsibility for oneself, b) providing structure and motivation for managing impulses that may become slips, and c) helping parents and others who care feel like they are allies in the recovery process.

Limitations of No-Harm Contracts

The limitations of no-harm contracts include: a) possibly becoming a symbolic power struggle when perceived as coerced, b) possibly inadvertently shifting the focus from gaining the skills needed to stop the motivation for self-injury in the first place to overly focusing on the self-injury behavior, c) feasibly setting the person who self-injures up to fail since it may not be possible to totally stop injuring right away, even with the best of intentions. The feelings that accompany such slips may exacerbate the very feelings that lead to self-injury in the first place.

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Share Feelings and Ideas

The idea of a no-harm contract provides yet another opportunity for a conversation with your child. Share your feelings, thoughts, and desires about a no-harm contract (or no-harm contract alternative – be creative and responsive to each of your needs), and ask your child about whether or not this kind of external accountability would be useful. If your views on this differ widely, seek to reach a compromise and set a date to revisit the agreement. *Keeping the door open for further dialogue* about how to best support your child's recovery from self-injury is actually one of the best ways to support recovery!

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