



Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery

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Recovering from self-injury

Who is this for?

Those who struggle with self-injury and others interested in the process of recovering from self-injury

What is included?

Information about the recovery process

TIPS FOR:

Evaluating the role self-injury plays in your life

Building self-confidence

Reaching out to support networks

Dealing with relapse

Congratulating yourself

“Recovery is a long hike, but do it anyway: The view from the top is amazing.” –self-injury message board post

Recovering from self-injury is a journey and a process.

The reasons someone begins self-injuring are complex. Likewise, the emotions surrounding recovery may be difficult and complicated, too. You may want to stop, but doubt your ability to do so. You might feel afraid of the possibility of a future without self-injury and wonder how you will cope without it. The thought of giving up self-injury could bring up feelings of anxiety as well as relief.

Perhaps it helps to know that stopping injuring does not mean giving up your thoughts and feelings, but rather learning to embrace, tolerate, and eventually transform them. By even contemplating whether you can overcome self-injury, you have already taken the first step.

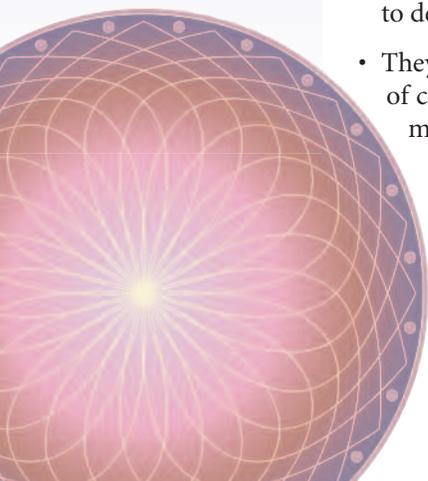
Why do you want to stop injuring?

While that may seem like a simple question, often it is not. You might have several well identified reasons for wanting to stop or you may not be able to think of any one particular reason at all – you just know it that it is time to move on. Some reasons people give for wanting to stop include:

- They begin to see that they are “growing out” of it – it begins to feel like an immature way to deal with life problems
- They begin to find other, more positive, ways of coping and want to improve their overall mental health
 - They want to take care of their physical health

- The shame, embarrassment or secrecy becomes too overwhelming and uncomfortable
- They want to escape pressure and reactions from others
- They dislike the physical scars it leaves behind
- Because they recognize the pain it causes the people they love
- Because self-injury is no longer working or helping them to cope

You may have other reasons not listed here. It is helpful to keep these reasons in mind throughout the recovery process: Knowing why you began the journey can help lead you to where you are going and help you to stay the course when the desire to injure feels really strong.



Beginning the recovery process

“There’s nothing wrong with you that what’s right with you couldn’t fix.” –Baruch Shalem

While it can take a lot of hard work, recovery is possible. Four factors that can help contribute to the recovery process are:

- Motivation
- Openness and honesty with oneself
- An involved support system
- Commitment to treatment and self-care

Though it may feel overwhelming at first and doubts may arise, your inner strengths and outer support systems can help guide you along the way. Some things you can try to do include:

- **Keep track of positive things about yourself.** Make a list of your strengths and accomplishments. Remind yourself that you and your well-being are important. Setting the right frame of mind can help make the recovery process smoother.
- **Reach out to family and friends and ask for their support.** This is not a journey you need to take alone.
- **Find a good therapist to help you along the way.** Having someone to talk to about your triggers, your past, and the fears you have about moving into your future can be really helpful. It is important to ask for and receive help. For more on finding a therapist visit http://www.selfinjury.com/referrals_findatherapist.html and see the Therapy: What to Expect factsheet (http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/factsheet_therapy_whattoexpect).
- **Find a place in your mind or life where you feel safe from harm.** Your safe place could be one or more comfortable spots in your mind, home, or a peaceful outdoor location – having multiple safe places is good. It could also be a song, movie, person or memory that makes you feel at ease. Go to this place whenever you feel the urge to injure.

- **Know that you are not alone.** There are others who have journeyed through self-injury and who have learned and grown through sharing their experiences.

Sometimes you need to look back to see what is ahead

Learning to end self-injury begins with understanding the reasons why you began injuring and why you want to stop. Questions you may want to ask yourself are:

- What role does self-injury play in my life?
- What change would I most like to see in my life right now?
- What things have been helpful to me in the past to keep me from injuring?
- What are some things self-injury has kept me from doing?
- How will the future look better once I am no longer self-injuring?
- What do I need most for myself right now?

Keep your answers to these questions in a place where you can refer back to them. They can be a good reminder of why you started the process and may offer guidance when faced with difficult decisions. If you have friends, family, counselors or community members you trust, share your answers to these questions with them as well so that they can work together to help keep you on track.

“Now that I can identify what makes me want to do it, it makes it easier to do other things and not do it. I can see the warning signs–like when I start to isolate myself–so I can stop the cycle before it starts.” –recovering self-injurer

“Faith is believing wholeheartedly in something good and taking action to ensure it. I keep that thought in mind every day as I struggle with depression and the thought of self-injuring again. I have faith in myself even if I’m scared sometimes. I have faith in everyone. We can overcome the struggle.” –self-injury message board post



“My mentor advised me to find something to replace cutting, otherwise it was useless to put effort into it. I started writing poetry, spending time with my brothers, singing and reading books. It helped a lot. The hard work is definitely worth it—I’m learning how to deal with stress in a healthy way that does not harm me.”

—self-injury message board post

Work in the present to influence the future

Self-injury does not begin overnight, nor will it go away all at once. Recovery may feel like a lot of small steps, but you will be surprised just how far those steps can take you in a short time. You might start by minimizing the amount of harm you do during self-injury, reducing the number of times you injure, then substituting other non-harmful behaviors for self-injury. Some strategies for this are:

- **Pay close attention to your emotions.** Make a note of any situation or feeling that comes up that makes you feel like injuring. These situations or feelings are often called “triggers.” Record them as you feel them. Try not to fix them, only watch and record them. Have faith – they will pass and so will the urge.
- **Focus on short time periods.** Make goals for the moment, day or week and work from there. If you experience an urge to injure, physically move your body into another place or find a quiet and peaceful place inside your mind to go until the urge passes. One exercise involves thinking of the urge to self-injure as a wave that slowly gets stronger, rises and eventually diminishes. You can practice using breathing and meditation to “ride” the craving until it fades or subsides.
- **Decide on something (or things) to take the place of self-injury in your life.** Think of the things you enjoy most or would most like to do with the time you will gain from not injuring. Have these in a mental file to pull out when the urge strikes – having a game plan for how to handle strong urges ahead of time really helps.
- **Practice coping techniques.** Challenge your ideas about self-injury by changing your behavior. See the Coping (<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/userfiles/File/Copingstress%20management%20REV.pdf>) and Distraction Techniques and Alternative Coping Strategies (http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/factsheet_coping_alternatives.asp) factsheets and start by picking five alternatives that you think could work for you. Practice these even when you are not feeling highly triggered. When you do this, you are teaching your brain and body how to respond differently.

The journey is not one you need to take alone

The people who know about your self-injury can be good resources throughout your recovery. By creating and reaching out to a support system, you can make it less likely that you will hurt yourself. Connecting honestly with even one trusted person in your life can reduce your feelings of hurt and isolation. While you do not need to tell everyone about your self-injury, letting a few trusted family members and friends know about your struggle helps you initiate new patterns of communication and trust with people who can support your desire and attempts at recovery.

One way to start is to list all the people or resources you can safely contact when you feel like injuring. Some ideas might be:

- friends
- family members
- therapist, counselor, or other mental health professional
- teacher, mentor, or academic advisor
- religious or spiritual advisor

If you do not feel you have anyone in your life with whom you can talk about your self-injury, you may want to turn to a confidential and/or anonymous source for recovery help and support. Some examples include:

- a national crisis line such as 1-800-273-TALK
- an online self-injury support group. Look for one that has a high or at least moderate level of moderation to prevent exposure to triggering content and/or one run by a mental health professional

“I rarely showed any sign of weakness in front of other people. [When] I became more open about it all...it forced me to accept that I had a problem. All my friends have been fantastic and they have all offered to help me. The best form of support that they can give me is the knowledge that they are there for me.” —self-injury message board post



Relapse can be a new beginning—not an end—to recovery

“In our struggles we may think we can’t go any further, not realizing it is merely a turning point.” —Bear Heart

Deciding to stop injuring and having a slip or returning to self-injury after having quit is not a sign of failure. Relapse can be a learning opportunity as well as a time to make positive steps toward recovering completely. Keep a diary of your triggers and note the situations that make you feel like injuring. Learning what makes you want to injure can help you pay attention to times when you need the most support.

If you do slip and return to self-injury, use the moment constructively to figure out what you can do the next time you feel the urge to injure. The best solutions can be ones you come up with on your own. Some questions you can ask are:

- What did you learn from the slip? About yourself?
About your relationship with self-injury?
- What does self-injury do for you?
- What do you need less or more of to stay on track for recovery?
- What can you do to prevent a major backslide?
- What has been successful in the past that has helped you to fight the urge to injure?
- What do you tell yourself in order to stop injuring?
- How do you view yourself when you succeed at not injuring?
- Who should you talk to the next time you feel the urge to injure?

You may want to share your answers to these questions with one or more of the people in your support network. It is possible that some of them will feel discouraged by your relapse. Having a record of what you have learned from the slip, what you hope to accomplish, and how you can better cope with future urges may provide some reassurance about your progress. The more the people in your support network can understand about your struggle to recover, the better equipped they will be to help you along the way.

“Don't be hopeless for the relapses, don't think of it as the end, there's always a beginning to recovery, we are all walking on it, stand up and keep going, stones are all over the road.”

—self-injury message board post

How can I stop myself from relapsing when I feel like injuring?

The good news is this: It gets easier. Once you have been able to confront self-injury and challenge your thinking about it, the urge to self-injure will get weaker and appear less often. Some exercises you can try to avoid relapse are:

- **Think of situations that prompted you to self-injure.** Write down these situations and why you gave yourself permission to injure. How many of these reasons still seem valid to you? Was there something you could have done instead of injuring? What have you been doing that has helped you cope when you have not relapsed? How can you help yourself do more of that?
This exercise can help you prepare for future situations and give you a road map of what you can do the next time a similar situation arises.
- **Keep a daily log and make notes of things that prompt you to think about self-injury.** Do you see any patterns? If so, identify the situations and/or conflicts that make you feel this way. Try to confront these situations when they arise, instead of letting your tension rise to the point where it feels uncontrollable.
This exercise can help you recognize patterns and help you deal with them before they become crises.
- **Think of situations in which you successfully avoided self-injuring.** Do you see any patterns? Keep a daily or weekly log of successes and the factors that you notice contribute to your success. Find ways to surround yourself, inside and outside, with the people, activities, and practices that strengthen your resolve and capacity to treat your body well.
This exercise can help you recognize and focus on bolstering success patterns and practices.



- **Replace the objects or materials you use to injure with alternatives that can help you cope.** Place these new items in convenient places, including pockets, purses or bookbags and desk drawers. Some things you can substitute could be:
 - drawing or journaling materials
 - an icon or physical symbol or totem that gives you courage, power, or hope to hold
 - a picture of someone or something important to you
 - a song that inspires and lifts your mood
 - the list of reasons you want to quit injuring
 - the names and contact numbers of people in your support network

Getting in the habit of using these alternatives can help you replace an unhealthy routine with a healthy one.



Overview of self-injury along with coping and recovery stories:

<http://www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm>

For parents, family and loved ones:

<http://www.users.zetnet.co.uk/BCSW/leaflets/helpresp.htm>

One family's recovery story:

<http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/features/self-injury-one-family-story>

S.A.F.E. Alternatives:

<http://www.selfinjury.com>

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- i Adapted from D'Onofrio, A. (2007), p149.
- ii Adapted from Alderman, T. (1997), p127.
- iii As cited in Selekman, M. (2002).
- iv Adapted from Conterio, K., Lader, W., & Bloom, J. K. (1998), p286.
- v Adapted from Selekman, M. (2006).
- vi Adapted from Tantam, D. & Huband, N. (2009).
- vii Suggestion from Conterio, K., Lader, W., & Bloom, J. K. (1998), p256.
- viii Adapted from Alderman, T. (1997), p137.
- ix As cited in: Selekman, M. (2006).
- x Adapted from Selekman, M. (2006).
- xi Paraphrased from Conterio, K., Lader, W., & Bloom, J. K. (1998), p280-1, 287.

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