



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

Finding your voice: *Talking about self-injury*

by Patricia Rothenberg
& Janis Whitlock

Who is this for?

Those who are already well along in their path of recovery and are in need of ways to talk about remaining scars, both inside and out, with others.

This information will be the most helpful for people who know that talking about self-injury is not likely to trigger a self-injury episode and who feel resilient and generally emotionally stable.

For those who have not yet fully recovered from self-injury, please refer to the Alternative Coping Strategies and Recovering from Self-Injury factsheets for tips and information about stopping self-injury.

Talking about your self-injury from a place of recovery.

Deciding if you should reach out

'Coming clean' about a past or present with self-injury can be an empowering and positive experience. Even though it might not feel this way, talking about such a personal experience often fosters a deeper feeling of connectedness with those close to us and a deeper security in your own identity.

Is the time right for you?

It is important to first consider where you are in recovery: have you spent enough time reflecting on your experiences with self-injury to be able to talk about them with someone else? Have you accepted that part of your past by understanding its significance in your life? Have you learned something positive about yourself from the experience? Also, consider why you want to talk about self-injury: Do you want to be true to yourself by being honest about your past? Do you want to feel closer with friends and family? Do you feel like it will let people see the 'true you'? Make sure you are truly ready to talk about what is most likely a painful experience from your past in a way that honors yourself and those with whom you are sharing it.

Reaching out: Sharing your self-injury experience with those you care about

Self-injury can create an emotional distance between you and others. Shame and stigma causes many who self-injure to hide the behavior and keep it a secret even from those closest to them. In a 2006 study, 36% of self-injurers in a college population reported that no one knew about their self-injury. In addition, acts of self-injury often cause dissociation, a state of feeling disconnected from the self. You cannot feel connected to others if you do not feel connected to yourself. Scars may also contribute to keeping you isolated from other people; you may feel self-conscious about your scars, and avoid intimate situations with others or activities in which your scars might show, such as swimming. For reasons like these, self-injury prevents true intimacy and honesty between you and others. When you decide that you are ready, you may want to disclose your experience with self-injury to become closer to those who are important to you.

The planning stage: What to do before the conversation

A good way to prepare for the conversation is to think about the five W's: who, what, when where, and why.

- **Who:** Who are you going to have the conversation with? A therapist, a parent, a friend, your significant other? This person should be a good listener and trustworthy: think about the people who have been there for you in the past and whether they have helped you when you have come to them to talk about a problem.

Finding your voice: *Talking about self-injury*

continued
page 2 of 3

*Most importantly,
be honest and
confident in your
conversation and
help them understand
where you are in the
recovery process.*

- **What:** What are you going to say? It might be helpful to plan out what you are going to say beforehand, or even practice saying the words out loud. Try to focus on the emotional aspects of self-injury rather than the graphic details. Decide whether you feel comfortable enough to have a conversation face-to-face; alternatively, you may want to consider writing a note or sending an email.
- **When:** When are you going to have the conversation? You should give enough time for you to say all that you need to say and for the other person to ask questions. Make sure that both of you are calm. If the other person is busy or dealing with difficult issues, he or she may not be able to give you the support you are looking for. In addition, do not disclose information about self-injury during an argument. You can always put off the conversation now and come back to it at a better time in the future.
- **Where:** Where are you going to have the conversation? Do you want this conversation to be somewhere private? It is probably best to pick a calm and quiet location so that both of you can focus on the conversation without any distractions. Sometimes talking in the car can be a good strategy if you want to avoid making eye contact.
- **Why:** Why are you having this conversation? It is important to identify the true reasons that you wish to 'come out' about self-injury so that you can make it clear to the other person why you are telling them, and so that you can get what you want out of the conversation.

Tips for having the conversation and what to expect

The following are just a few things to keep in mind when when starting a conversation about self-injury:

- Explain to the person why you are telling them.
- Avoid graphic details—particularly at first; focus on the reasons for and emotions associated with your self-injury.
- It is OK to have boundaries—if they ask you a question that makes you uncomfortable, you can simply say “I do not feel comfortable answering that.”
- Expect the person you’re talking with to have misconceptions about self-injury or have a hard time understanding why someone would self-injure. Be prepared to explain what self-injury is and answer any questions they might have. Most people use self-injury as a way to cope with overwhelming feelings; please see our factsheet “What is self-injury?” for more information that might be helpful for this conversation.
- Be ready for the person you’re talking with to have a bad initial reaction, but remember that this topic is likely to be shocking for most people. Give people time to overcome the shock. The person you’re talking with might actually need to postpone the rest of the conversation if this information is overwhelming. Please keep in mind that your confidant is just a person, too – he or she might not be totally prepared to deal with this information when you’re ready to talk about it. Keeping the door open for future conversations about your experiences can make it easier for both of you.
- Most importantly, be honest and confident in your conversation and help them understand where you are in the recovery process. If you are comfortable, share some of the positive things you do to cope now. Talking with a tone of acceptance especially over painful issues makes people feel calmer and at ease, and helping them understand what you have learned along the way and where you are in your life now will help them feel more comfortable.

Finding your voice: *Talking about self-injury*

continued
page 3 of 3

*...remember
that you do not
have to continue the
conversation*

*Choosing to share
your story
is courageous,
and is,
in and of itself,
a sign of healing.*

There are many ways to actually have the conversation. Consider having it.

- **Face to face:** telling the person directly can be an empowering experience. This also has the benefit of allowing you and the other person to read each other's facial expressions and body language.
- **Through an email/letter:** this enables you to say exactly what you want to say without interruption.
- **On the phone:** this can be a good option if the person is not local. However, you will not have visual cues for communication, so be as clear as possible.
- **Avoid having this conversation** over text message or any other communication route that does not allow for rich emotional details to be shared—this can do more harm than good.

If the Conversation becomes uncomfortable

Although you may feel comfortable starting a conversation, your level of comfort may change over time. If the path that the conversation is taking makes you uncomfortable, remember that you do not have to continue. It is perfectly okay to share your discomfort and either end or postpone the conversation. You can pick it up another time if you feel up for it or just let the person know that you have shared as much as you are comfortable sharing for now.

After the conversation

Hopefully, the conversation brings about a deeper understanding between you and another person. It may help you, however, be prepared for potential ambivalent or even negative reactions. It is important to remember:

- It can be difficult to hear about vulnerable, scary, or difficult times in other people's lives.
- Adjusting takes time for some people. First reactions are not indicative of support someone may be able to give you once they have processed his or her emotions.
- Give him or her space if he/she asks for it.
- You are not responsible for controlling what others think or feel; what someone else thinks or feels is not a reflection on you. We each react to things we encounter differently and in alignment with our very personal histories and capacities.
- Self-injury can provoke strong emotions, and an unsupportive response is typically a sign of someone who may have trouble allowing his or herself to feel vulnerable. It has nothing to do with you. Focus on taking care of yourself and trust that your friend will take care of him or herself.
- Choosing to share your story is courageous, and is, in and of itself, a sign of healing. Your courage and your story are gifts of trust and hope that you share with those you love and those who may also know some level of suffering.

Suggested Citation

Rothenberg, P. & Whitlock, J. (2013). Finding your own voice: Talking to others about your self-injury. The Practical Matters Series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE: www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu

This research was supported by the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station federal formula funds, received from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.