



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

## Reaching Out For Help: *Talking About Ongoing Self-Injury*

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### Who is this for?

Specifically for individuals who are actively using self-injury to cope.

### What is included?

Tips on how to share ongoing self-injury

Reasons why sharing self-injury can be helpful

Emotional considerations to take into account before disclosure

Deciding on a “right time” to share

Reflecting on your needs

Moving forward after disclosure

**Talking about self-injury is not easy.** Self-injurious behaviors are typically private behaviors. Although some people do report wanting attention, the majority of individuals who engage in self-injury are not seeking attention; rather, they are seeking an escape, emotional release, or relief from a sense of emotional numbness. For most people, self-injury is carried out behind closed doors and hidden under long sleeves and pants. It’s masked with a smile and the standard, “I’m ok.” or “I’m good.”, remarks that we tell others even when we don’t really mean it. Up to a third of those who self-injure never tell anyone about their experience; they bear their pain quietly and in secret, hiding scars until they’ve faded and perhaps only ever really talking about it years after they’ve stopped.

### **I haven’t stopped self-injuring so what good will it do to tell someone?**

The idea of sharing such private and often shaming experiences with others can bring up all sorts of mixed feelings -- intense fear, guilt, sadness, relief, shame, and/or hope. If self-injury is an ongoing struggle in your life, talking about it with friends, parents, and significant others can be a daunting task. It is common to not share out of worry about being judged, punished, yelled at, or feeling ashamed and hurt. It is also common to worry about hurting parents, loved ones, or others. Indeed, harming oneself rather than “harming” someone else by expressing what could be perceived as hurtful or hard feelings is one of the reasons that some people injure in the first place; sharing painful truths can be really difficult and feel threatening. The reality is that regardless of the feelings that contribute to starting self-injury, the behavior itself tends to take on a life of its own and simply makes the rest of life, caring, and relationships that much harder. And, even if it is hidden, it is probably not as hidden as one thinks – it is really common for people close to you to notice a change in behavior, attitude, or emotional availability.

Ultimately, the path out of not only the self-injury behavior but out of all of the fears, hurts, and insecurities that helped to get you there in the first place is honesty – first with yourself and then with others. It may help to keep in mind that the people who love you will be relieved that you have decided to open up and be honest – even if that is not what they feel initially. Indeed, it is common for this kind of honest sharing to lead to the help and support you have needed and/or wanted but have not been able to ask for. In our interviews with individuals who were “outed” in some way – by themselves or others – not a single person says that they regret it in the long run, although it can feel scary at the time. Most people who share their struggle with self-injury describe that their relationships with loved ones have grown stronger as a result.

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## Is now the right time?

Deciding when to reach out to someone can be difficult. Telling others can be empowering and set the stage for the support you need to continue your recovery journey. There is no one right time to share, but if you are beginning to think about it, even a little, then you are probably getting ready. Indeed, if you are reading this document to help you decide whether to share, then you are probably getting ready! Keep in mind that you will most likely never feel like any time is the perfect time and this may mean confronting fears around control. There are, however, a few things you can consider or do to set a more positive stage and ready yourself for making the decision:

- Think about who to talk to first.
- Consider where and when you want to do it.
- Consider what you want to share in the initial conversation.
- Think about how you can support yourself, and get your needs met, if you do not receive the reaction you had hoped for at the beginning.
- Make a plan to celebrate your courage – with yourself or with someone else. Disclosing a secret, no matter what it is, is scary and it is good to find small ways to reward yourself for being brave enough to do it!

## Who should I tell?

As you think about who you want to tell about your self-injury, it is useful to consider how he/she may feel upon hearing what you share. If you choose a parent, close relative, or other caring adult, they are likely to feel a mix of feelings – most often fear, sadness, and/or guilt mixed in with relief and gratitude that you shared. Sometimes, this mix of feelings happens really suddenly and can feel overwhelming to the receiver so what ends up coming out instead is anger and/or shock. If you can keep in mind that these feelings are "secondary," not the primary feelings, and that they tend to signal a whole bunch of other feelings all of which say "I really care about you and feel scared." – it can help you be okay with the initial reaction if it is not as supportive and understanding as you might like.

An important thing to keep in mind is that there is no one "right" or "wrong" person with whom to share your self-injury. Not all people will react in the same manner to this information, but it's better to focus on qualities of the relationship that feel productive and supportive, even if the disclosure doesn't go as you had imagined. Disclosure of self-injury isn't a one-time opportunity: if you find that the conversation didn't go as you had imagined, it can be an opportunity for you to seek out a different person the next time. This would allow you to try a different communication tactic, express yourself more calmly or clearly, and/or seek outside help (in the form of a therapist or other clinically trained adult) to help you disclose your self-injury in a manner that feels comfortable to you.

## Special considerations if you are a young person:

In general, studies show that youth who self-injure are more likely to tell a friend than anyone else at first. But, studies also show that youth who self-injure actually find it much more helpful to tell a parent or another adult. Even if it is scary, a parent or other adult will be better able to handle your disclosure and your feelings than a friend – even if it does not seem that

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way at first. They are also more likely to know how to authentically help, and how to get you the kind of support you will need.

In general, parents and other adults will be relieved at your disclosure and will likely do everything they can to provide you with support- even if it takes them a little while (usually hours or days) to figure out how to start and what to do. If, on the other hand, you decide to tell a close friend, you should think about what they will do with the information you give them – particularly if your friend is a teen. Because self-injury “works” as a coping skill (albeit a negative one), it is not uncommon for teens who are feeling really overwhelmed by their feelings, or unable to manage their feelings, to “try it out” - especially if they know that a friend is doing it, is accepting of it, or is getting attention from it. If you are considering telling a friend, ask yourself if you can see this friend considering the use of self-injury because it is something that you do and are telling them about.

An additional consideration when telling friends, if you determine that they will not “copy” your behavior, is whether or not you are expecting them to keep the information you disclose to them a secret. If you tell a friend, they will be concerned, but asking them to be a “secret keeper” of your self-injury may be asking too much since he/she may be scared for your well-being. Asking a friend, who you trusted because he/she cares about you, to be alone with knowledge that you are hurting yourself may be more than he/she can handle. While you may feel angry or betrayed if he/she ends up telling someone, particularly an adult, please understand that your friend is likely acting out of a genuine desire to care for you. That’s what friends are for, after all, right?!

If you are not ready for the reaction of a friend or a parent, you can still choose to disclose your self-injury to a therapist, counselor, or other trusted adult. To find out more about therapy, see the Practical Matters Choosing a Therapist and Myths about Therapy.

### **What do I need?**

As you consider discussing self-injury with someone, first determine what it is you are hoping to accomplish by sharing. Do you want someone to support you on the road to recovery? Are you sick of the secrets? Do you want them to provide you with help and resources? Do you want them to be your confidant? Or do you just want someone to talk to about your feelings? Asking yourself these types of questions before you tell someone can help you feel more confident about doing so and determine whom the right person to tell is.

It can be useful to imagine the conversation or even role-play it in your head. Planning what you want to say ahead of time will minimize the possibility of sharing too much, sharing too little, or getting into an emotionally-loaded argument with your confidant. It can help to know that the most common question that someone is likely to have is why? He/she may also have questions about how, when and where you do it. Curiosity is normal so expect a lot of questions. Thinking a little in advance about how much you want to share and how you will respond if a question comes up that you are not comfortable answering can help you navigate this aspect of the conversation.

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## **But won't they just be mad at me?**

Self-injury can bring up a whole range of feelings for people. Sometimes, as mentioned above, these feelings come out as anger. But anger is rarely the only emotion present; it is most likely accompanied by fear, deep sadness, and sometimes, guilt. These responses are normal and can be especially strong in parents since they usually are the most concerned with, and invested in, your well-being, even if it doesn't seem like it at times. Over time, the anger recedes and the real feelings start to come out. Keep in mind that sharing personal information and being vulnerable can open up new pathways of understanding and communication and could end up expanding a relationship.

Regardless of whom you decide to reach out to, if you are still self-injuring, it is important to prepare yourself for the possibility that the person will encourage you to stop the behavior. This does not mean that you've chosen the wrong person, or that they don't respect you or your right to autonomy. If you get this reaction, especially from family or friends, try to remember that they are asking you to stop for a very basic reason- they care about you and don't want you to be in pain.

## **Moving forward after disclosure:**

After you decide to tell someone about your self-injury, you will find yourself at a unique place in the recovery journey. The desire to talk about your experience and share it with others is part of the healing process of trusting yourself and others enough to navigate through difficult emotions, behaviors, and circumstances. It is a time in which you may feel torn: you will still be closely linked to the silent aspects of your old behavior and its secrets, habits, and patterns, while also moving towards changing that behavior, simply by being honest about its occurrence and your growing questions or concerns about continuing it. It may be a bumpy ride, with ups and downs. Change can be difficult and overwhelming at times...but remember your resolve to tell, to be truthful, and to journey on: the same inner strength that has guided you thus far can continue to lead you to a place of greater peace.

## **References and Other Sources Consulted**

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

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## **FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE: [www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu](http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu)**

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