



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

Telling Family and Friends

by Mandy Purington
& Janis Whitlock

When you find out your child is self-injuring, it is common and understandable to focus on helping your son or daughter move forward with recovery, but living with and supporting someone who self-injures is often very stressful for parents and family members. Self-care is vital during this time and reaching out to trusted family and/or friends about your experiences and feelings is one important way of supporting yourself and, by extension, your child.

Self-injury can be a very difficult thing to talk about. While research indicates there is no single cause of self-injury, many parents of young people who self-injure describe feeling shame or guilt. Most of the time these feelings occur because parents worry that they have contributed to their child's self-injury in some way. Similarly, many parents feel fear that sharing negative information about their child will cause someone to feel negatively about their child and/or will reflect badly on the family or them. Reaching out to a supportive family or friend can help allay these feelings. Moreover, sharing your experiences, struggles, and successes can bring some level of relief, provide an outside perspective, and ultimately help the healing process not only for your self-injurious child, but for you as well.

Starting a conversation

Who? The first step is to identify the people in your life that you think are likely to be able to hear what you have to say and support you. Not everyone you know is a good candidate for supporting you during this time, but it is likely that some are. Who are the people that you think you can trust to understand you and withhold judgment? If you are sharing because you are seeking support for yourself, consider the capacity of this person to provide support. If you have shared confidential information with him or her in the past, did you feel supported afterward? Was there any reason you wish you had not shared, or that you had shared a different level of detail? If the other person is also currently dealing with difficult issues, he or she might not be able to provide you with the support you seek. Keep in mind that you do not need many confidants to feel supported – even one can make a big difference in your sense of wellbeing. And, since your wellbeing is a central ingredient in your child's recovery, helping yourself in this way is helping your child.

What? Think about **what** you want to share. Maybe you do not even need to share that your child is self-injuring, but rather just that your child is struggling right now and that it has been difficult for everyone in the family. Be prepared for the possibility that you will need to educate your confidant about self-injury if you share some of the specifics – many adults may not know what it is or understand that it is not a suicide attempt.

When and where? It helps to think a little about **when** and **where** to have the first conversation. This is something you will want to discuss privately. Face-to-face conversation is often the most comfortable, but if that is too hard or if the person you want to talk to does not live

Telling Family and Friends

continued
page 2 of 2

near, a phone conversation may work just as well. Just be sure to have enough time for you to say all that you want to say, as well as for the other person to ask questions, without interruptions or distractions. You will also want to make sure that both of you are calm when you share this information, as it is likely to evoke emotion. Keep in mind you can always put off the conversation and come back to it at another, better time. If the conversation becomes uncomfortable for any reason, you do not have to continue.

Why? It is useful to think a little about **why** you want to tell someone your child is self-injuring simply as a means of clarifying what you hope to get from sharing. Here are some common questions to consider:

- Are you seeking support for yourself?
- Would you like this person to better understand what is going on with your child and for your family?
- Do you just feel like you *should* tell this person? This may be the case for your child's other parent, or those living in the household.
- Would sharing help someone else? Maybe you see another person struggling with something similar in his or her family and you would like to share your experiences as a way of offering support or hope.

It would also be helpful to let the person you are confiding in know why you are sharing – maybe you could start the conversation this way: “I just need someone to listen right now,” or “I could really use some advice.” Ultimately, it is not critical to know exactly what you want from someone you talk to, but it may help you know more about what you want and need and this makes it more likely that you will come away satisfied and feeling supported.

Remember, reaching out to support yourself *is* a way of supporting your child. You matter A LOT so anything that supports and stabilizes you will help your child and your family.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Purington, M. & Whitlock, J. (2013). *Telling family and friends*. The Practical Matters series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

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