



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

## Wounds heal, but scars remain

### *Responding when someone notices and asks about your past self-injury*

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#### **Who is this for?**

Those in recovery for self-injury who are unsure about how to address questions from others about visible scars/signs of previous self-injury.

**Although self-injury** may be wholly a part of your past, visible scars may remain. When others notice and ask about them, it can feel awkward. How do you talk about something that is or was so private, the source of shame or guilt, and/or so long ago that it feels like another you or another life? Although hard, such moments can be an opportunity for honesty, authenticity, and education.

#### **Decide if allowing scars to be visible is the right decision for you**

In deciding whether to hide or reveal scars, consider where you are in recovery and what experiences are likely to advance your healing. Although reducing shame and learning to feel comfortable with who you are is a key part of the recovery process, you may not be ready to share with people you do not know well. Clothing, or products like Dermablend can help you conceal your scars until you are ready to answer questions about them.

#### **Please note, we do NOT advise hiding scars if they are still healing.**

It is best to talk with a doctor about your injuries. If you are still self-injuring, please consider reaching out for help—parents or other adults may be able to help connect you with other resources. Check out [www.selfinjury.com](http://www.selfinjury.com) and [www.crpsib.com](http://www.crpsib.com) and for more information and information on connecting to a therapist. Please also refer to the factsheets *Alternative Coping Strategies* and *Recovering from Self Injury* or call 1-800-273-TALK if you need someone to talk to.

#### **When scars are visible and noticed: Responding to strangers**

While talking about past self-injurious behavior can be a healthy and healing part of recovery, having a stranger notice scars and ask about them can cause feelings of awkwardness, fear, or embarrassment. In this case, prioritize your own wellbeing! It is not your responsibility to satisfy someone else's curiosity. There are ways of talking about your experience that allow you to be both honest and kind without going into too much detail. Here are some examples:

- "Thanks for asking, but it is not something I talk about with people I do not know well."
- "These are scars from a hard time in my life, but I am not comfortable talking about it now."
- "Yes, they are noticeable, aren't they? That is a story for another time and place."

The bottom line is that your sense of safety and wellbeing are most important—you need not share anything you are not comfortable sharing. At the same time, it is understandable that people will be curious if your scars are visible. While some people will instinctively avoid asking you about something that they sense may make you uncomfortable, some people will be more comfortable being direct and honest about their curiosity. This does not make them insensitive, only curious and brave enough to say so. You, however, have the option of meeting such curiosity with equal courage by being clear about what you are and are not comfort-



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able sharing in that moment. It can be hard to feel like you are shutting down another person's curiosity, but that is OK—it is more important that you are comfortable. To be prepared, it is good to visualize and walk through how you might handle situations like this before they happen so you feel prepared and confident about how you might respond and so that you do not feel caught off-guard.

### Children

Children may also be curious about scars, but it is important to talk with them on an appropriate level. They may not be able to understand the “why” of self-injury, and it may be detrimental to try to explain the full story to them. Redirecting the conversation without ignoring the child's question can be a good strategy. You might want to respond by saying something like, “these are scars. Do you have any scars?” Keep answers simple. In all likelihood, a one-sentence answer will be enough to satisfy a child's curiosity. Scars do not have to keep you from being around children. If you are able to give them a simple explanation for your scars, there is no reason for the child to be upset or scared.

### Teens

These days, it is most likely that if a teen asks you about scars, he or she already knows about self-injury. Self-injury is prominent in the media and is a topic that is discussed in many health classes. Young people often know someone who has engaged in self-injury, or they may even be engaging in it themselves. It is possible that if a teen is asking you about your scars, he or she is reaching out for help for him or herself, or a friend who is self-injuring. This is an opportunity to help someone who is currently dealing with a problem which you have faced in the past. Again, your own well-being comes first, but this really could be an opportunity to educate and/or help, even if it is simply by modeling how someone healthfully deals with emotionally-charged topics. Saying something like, “these are scars from a really hard time in my life, but I am not comfortable saying more about it now. Have you ever had a hard time in your life that left marks on your mind or body?” may encourage the teen to share. Seeing someone who has obviously struggled with something like self-injury stay emotionally honest and balanced, even when a difficult topic comes up, is really valuable to teens who have a difficult time dealing with emotions. If they do share similar experiences or emotions, you can use the opportunity to refer them to coping resources such as a self-injury hotline or the [www.crpsib.com](http://www.crpsib.com) website. If you feel comfortable sharing more about your own history and experiences, keep in mind that it is best to focus on reasons that you stopped and how you stopped—not on the details of what you did to self-injure.

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

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