

Helpful Responses to Self-Harm



If someone in your life has chosen to disclose their self-harm to you, it shows that they trust you and want your support.

Short Term

Show that you see and care about the person in pain behind the self-harm. A person who has harmed themselves may be distressed, ashamed or vulnerable. You have an opportunity to offer compassion and respect – something different from what they may be used to receiving.

Show concern for the injuries themselves. If you feel upset by the injuries, it may be best to be honest about this, while being clear that you can deal with your own feelings and don't blame them for them.

Make it clear that self-harm is okay to talk about, and can be understood.

Convey your respect for the person's efforts to survive, even if this involves hurting themselves. They are doing what they can to cope in difficult circumstances.

Acknowledge how frightening it may be to think of living without self-harm. It may be helpful to reassure the person that you will not try to rid them of their way of coping.

Reassure yourself you are not responsible for their self-harm – this will relieve pressure on both of you and will enable you to support them better.

Acknowledge their bravery in speaking about their self-harm – this can be a frightening thing to do and takes courage.

Longer Term

Let the person know their reasons for self-harm are valid, and support them to discover what those reasons are. Reasons for self-harm can be complicated and not every person will know how to explain what they might be. You could support the person to explore the reasons for their self-harm, perhaps by helping them find resources, such as worksheets, support groups, or support services, to think this through. It's important to respect the person's readiness to do this and not rush them – this process can trigger painful emotions and memories.

Gently encourage the person to use the urge to self-harm as a signal of important but buried experiences, feelings, and needs. When they feel ready, you could offer to help them learn to express these things in other ways, such as through talking, writing, drawing, shouting, hitting something, etc. – but only if they are open to this.

Support the person in beginning to take steps to keep themselves safe and to reduce their self-harm, if they wish to. Examples of valuable steps might be: taking fewer risks (e.g. washing implements used to cut, avoiding drinking alcohol if they think they are likely to self-harm); taking better care of injuries; reducing the severity or frequency of injuries even a little. In all of these cases, more choice and control are being exercised.

Don't see stopping self-harm as the only, or most important goal. A person may make great progress in many ways and still choose / need to continue using self-harm. Self-harm may also worsen for a while when difficult issues or feelings are being explored, or when old patterns are being changed. It can take a long time for a person to be ready to give up self-harm, if at all. Encourage them and yourself by acknowledging any small steps as major achievements.

Remember: It's not your job to try and stop or reduce the person's self-harm – this is something they may choose to do themselves in time, but only they can make that decision. Pressuring someone to change may make it harder for them to be fully honest, but listening without judgement will encourage them to keep sharing and processing their feelings and experiences.