

Strategies for supporting someone who self-injures

When you know someone who self-injures it can be stressful. It can be difficult to know what to say, if (or when) to seek external or professional help, and how to support the person, especially if they continue to self-injure. If someone has trusted you enough to talk about their self-injury, this could be for a number of reasons. However, having disclosed their experiences to you does open up a space to offer support. How you offer ongoing support is incredibly individual, depending on the nature of the self-injury, the relationship you have with the person, whether the person chose to disclose their self-injury to you or you discovered it another way, and your own capacity to cope with difficult situations and distress. There are lots of resources available to support people who self-injure; here we provide strategies to support you – as someone who cares about someone who self-injures.

Looking after yourself	On-going conversations	Being supportive
Put your own oxygen mask on first. You'll be most helpful if you are looking after your own health and wellbeing	Supporting someone who self-injures will involve many conversations over time	There is a lot you can do to support someone who self-injures – and it does not always need to be about self-injury
Be aware of your own reaction and how it might change over time	It's ok to check in now and then to see how the person is doing, but don't pressure them to talk	If the person does not want to stop, or if they do self-injure, it's not your fault
Learn about self-injury, including common myths (http://sioutreach.org/)	Focus on what the person needs right now (keep in mind they may not know)	It's also not their fault. Learning new coping strategies is hard. This will take time and there will be setbacks along the way. Don't give up
Allow yourself space to process information. Sometimes conversations can be difficult and emotional	Avoid jumping straight in with questions that feed your own curiosity	Be empathic and adopt a respectful curiosity
Don't promise to keep it a secret, as this can be unrealistic and a burden. But establish the boundaries of confidentiality.	Validate how the person is feeling, without being judgmental	Let the person know you are there for them. Just knowing that there is someone who is supportive can be powerful
Let the person know if it is getting too much and you need to take a break	Don't be afraid of silence. Allow the person space to process their thoughts and emotions. Talking about their experience is likely to be difficult and/or emotionally draining (for both of you)	Removing means to self-injure and suggesting replacement behaviours (e.g. rubber bands) is often not helpful and removes personal control.
Offer to go with the person to seek external support if needed. This can take some of the pressure off you	Just sitting quietly with someone can help them feel less overwhelmed, and feel like they have your support.	Establish the boundaries of confidentiality. Unless it's an emergency, telling anyone else is best done with consent of the person who self-injures
Make use of your own support network to maintain your own health and wellbeing	Not every conversation needs to be about self-injury. Don't let self-injury redefine your relationship	Talk together about what you can do if they feel upset or have an urge to self-injure. Generate a list of strategies you can use in a variety of different situations