



When Your Teenager Self-Injures



THE CHALLENGE

You discover that your teenager has been intentionally injuring herself. ‘What does this mean?’ you wonder. ‘Is my daughter trying to kill herself?’

Most likely the answer is no. Nevertheless, if your teenager self-injures, she needs help. How can you provide it? First, consider what could be behind her troubling behavior.

Self-injury is the practice of compulsively harming oneself, whether by cutting, bruising, hitting, or another method.

Although in this article we refer to the self-injurer as a female, the principles discussed apply to both genders.

WHY IT HAPPENS

Is self-injury just a fad? Admittedly, some young people start to self-injure because they have heard that others do it. Even when that is the case, this is not a typical fad. What makes it different? The self-injurer usually acts in secret and is deeply ashamed of her habit. “I didn’t want anyone to know what I was doing,” says 20-year-old Celia.* “I hid my scars very well.”

Is self-injury simply a means to get attention? Some might use it that way. But the self-injurers we are discussing in this article tend to hide their practice and are not trying to use their cuts or bruises to impress anyone. Still, one former self-injurer says that she *wished* someone had noticed her injuries so that the matter could have been brought to light and she could have got help sooner.

Why, then, do people self-injure? The causes of self-injury are complex, but underneath it all the young person usually feels *emotional pain that is difficult to express in words*. In his book *Cutting*, mental health expert Steven Levenkron describes the self-injurer as “someone who has found that physical pain can be a cure for emotional pain.”

What if you blame yourself? Rather than dwell on the possible role of faulty parenting in your teenager’s self-injury, focus on the role of *good parenting* in her *recovery*.

* Names in this article have been changed.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Encourage your teenager to talk to you about what is troubling her. The following tips can help.

Console. If your teenager reveals to you that she self-injures, try not to react with shock or horror. Instead, speak in a calm and consoling manner.—*Bible principle: 1 Thessalonians 5:14.*

Ask nonthreatening questions. For instance, you could say: “I know you don’t always feel good about yourself. What frustrates you the most?” or “What can I do to help you when you feel anxious or depressed?” or “What do you most need from me in order for us to bridge the gap between us?” Listen to her replies without interrupting.—*Bible principle: James 1:19.*

The self-injurer usually feels emotional pain that is difficult to express in words

Help your teenager to see herself in a balanced light.

Since self-injurers often focus on their failings, perhaps you can encourage your teenager to recognize her positive traits. You might even suggest that she write down at least three things that she likes about herself. “Writing down my strengths helped me to see that I have good qualities,” says a young woman named Briana.*

Encourage your teenager to pray to Jehovah God. The Bible says: “Throw all your anxiety upon him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7) “I made an effort to pour out my feelings to Jehovah God,” says Lorena, 17, “especially when I was tempted to self-injure. It helped me to try that much harder to stop.”—*Bible principle: 1 Thessalonians 5:17.* ■

* Often, self-injury is a symptom of depression or another disorder. In such cases, medical help may be needed. *Awake!* does not endorse any particular approach. However, Christians should be sure that any treatment they pursue does not conflict with Bible principles.

KEY SCRIPTURES

“Speak consolingly to the depressed souls.”—1 Thessalonians 5:14.

“Be swift about hearing, slow about speaking.”—James 1:19.

“Pray incessantly.”—1 Thessalonians 5:17.

“I TOLD MY MOM”

“Some time after I stopped cutting myself, I told my mom. I thought she would yell at me, but she was supportive. In fact, she was sad that I felt as if I couldn’t talk to her about my problems. She wanted to make sure that I got better. I felt better after I told her. She gave me love, which was all I really wanted in the first place.”—Celia.

For more information, see the article “Young People Ask—Why Do I Cut Myself?” It is published on our Web site, www.jw.org
(Look under BIBLE TEACHINGS > TEENAGERS)

