

# TIPS FOR PARENTS ABOUT SELF-INJURY

## What is self-injury?

- Self-injury is deliberate harm to one's own body. This can include cutting, burning or "branding", picking at skin or re-opening wounds, hair pulling, hitting self, bone breaking, head banging.
- Self-injury is not usually suicidal behavior, ***however it should still be taken seriously***. Self-injury can also be associated with suicidal ideation or attempts.
- Self-injury is usually recurrent even though some children try it once or a couple of times.
- There usually is a "preoccupation" with the self injury, an inability to resist the impulse once the decision is made to self injure, and an increase in tension, anger, anxiety, distress, or depersonalization immediately before the act of self injury.
- A sense of relaxation, gratification, pleasant feelings, and/or numbness at the time of the self-injury or immediately after the self-injury.
- Often a sense of shame, fear, or embarrassment after the self-injury. The self-injurer most often attempts to hide the self-injury. However, some children self injure and do not make attempts to hide the self injury.

## How can I recognize the warning signs of self-injury?

- This can be difficult because children may be good at hiding their injuries, but look for unexplained cuts and burns. Often the cuts will be in clusters, X's, parallel lines, or words. Many times, children will make excuses for their injuries saying "the cat scratched me", "it was an accident", etc.
- Wearing of long pants or sleeves or wristbands that can cover the injury, especially in warm weather.
- Avoidance of swimming or changing in front of others (locker rooms).
- Isolation or withdrawal. Children will often spend more time in their rooms or bathroom.
- Depressed, sad, or irritable mood.
- Changes in sleep patterns, eating patterns, or lack of interest in pleasurable activities.
- Changes in friends, types of music, movies, artwork, internet sites visited, etc. (Music or art that is about self-injury or depressive themes).
- Missing knives or razors or finding sharp objects in your child's room or trash bin.
- Missing hair on head, eyebrows, eyelashes, etc.

## What can I do if I think my child is engaged in self-injury?

- Keep communication open between you and your child. Build communication on talking about “everyday stuff” with your child as well as talking about difficult subjects like self-injury, drugs, sex, etc.
- Keep your own feelings in check when talking to your child. It is normal to feel shock, anger, fear if you discover your child has self-injured however showing these emotions to your child will probably lead them to shut down or deny the self-injury.
- Allow your child to openly but appropriately express emotion such as hurt, sadness, anger, etc. Most often self-injury is a physical expression of these difficult feelings which they are having difficulty expressing verbally.
- Gently suggest alternative ways to deal with difficult emotions such as journaling, talking to you, calling a friend or helpline, doing a physical activity.
- Help boost your child’s self-confidence and self-esteem. Let them know that they are loved and encourage them to find their strengths as well as accepting their weaknesses.
- Seek out a mental health professional. Self-injury should be taken seriously and a child should be assessed for suicidal thoughts and depression. Individual, group, and/or family therapy can help a child and the family understand the problem and help increase coping skills.

For help please call: 911, Maricopa County - Crisis Response Network at 602-222-9444 or Marci Morrison, LCSW, School Social Worker