Helping a friend or family member who self-harms

Perhaps you’ve noticed suspicious injuries on someone close to you, or that person has admitted to you that he or she is cutting. Whatever the case may be, you may be feeling unsure of yourself. What should you say? How can you help?

**Deal with your own feelings.** You may feel shocked, confused, or even disgusted by self-harming behaviors—and guilty about admitting these feelings. Acknowledging your feelings is an important first step toward helping your loved one.

**Learn about the problem.** The best way to overcome any discomfort or distaste you feel about self-harm is by learning about it. Understanding why your friend or family member is self-injuring can help you see the world from his or her eyes.

**Don’t judge.** Avoid judgmental comments and criticism—they’ll only make things worse. The first two tips will go a long way in helping you with this. Remember, the self-harming person already feels ashamed and alone.

**Offer support, not ultimatums.** It’s only natural to want to help, but threats, punishments, and ultimatums are counterproductive. Express your concern and let the person know that you’re available whenever he or she wants to talk or needs support.

**Encourage communication.** Encourage your loved one to express whatever he or she is feeling, even if it’s something you might be uncomfortable with. If the person hasn’t told you about the self-harm, bring up the subject in a caring, non-confrontational way: “I’ve noticed injuries on your body, and I want to understand what you’re going through.”

If the self-harmer is a family member, prepare yourself to address difficulties in the family. This is not about blame, but rather about learning ways of dealing with problems and communicating better that can help the whole family.