

Cutting/Self-Harm

I have a friend who doesn't really like her body, and when she gets upset, tries to hurt herself. She just says it makes her feel better. I really don't understand it. I just would like to know if you have any thing I can tell her to help her get through this.

I think that not only does your friend have a problem with her body image, but most times people harm themselves because of deeper hurts. Real beauty comes from within, but so does real hurt and pain. Some people turn to self-harm, or cutting, for many reasons.

Many people say that the pain they experience when cutting is so much easier to deal with than the internal pain of feeling worthless or hopeless. They find it hard to believe that anyone could help or understand. When someone cuts or harms themselves it distracts from the real emotional pain and replaces it with physical pain instead, which is easier for them to deal with. Some cutters have "learned" to avoid showing emotion and use self-abuse to express their hurt or anger. These are the ones who often can't explain why they cut, and they simply lack the word to express that kind of feeling. It's the language their words can't speak.

Others say they feel "dead" inside and turn to self-injury in order to be reminded that they're still alive. The pain they cause themselves may seem like the only time they can feel anything at all. One young person I spoke with expressed that she couldn't cry. She referred to the blood as "red tears." Sometimes cutting seems to make a person feel better because it distracts them from what's really going on and gives them a sense of control. Their feelings and emotions seem out of control, so they reach for something they can control – injuring themselves.

There are also self-abusers who feel they can't rely upon anyone, so they turn to self-injury as an emotional release. Inside your friend may feel there's a part of her that wants to talk about the emptiness she feels, but she probably fears the rejection of people who may look down on her because of her behavior. Don't misunderstand, self-harm is wrong. But in response to finding out someone is engaged in cutting, many will express how they can't believe they're doing that, rather than looking at them and realizing how desperate they must be to do something this severe.

While most of us haven't physically cut ourselves, many of us live much of our lives cutting ourselves down, saying things that we would never say to another person. Often, our thoughts include things like, "You're so stupid. When will you ever get it right? You're just a failure." Even though we may share some of the same tendencies to cut ourselves down, we should never tell someone that we can understand how they feel. Try to let that person know that you want to understand and that you're there to listen. My dad always said there's a reason we have two ears and one mouth – we should listen more than we speak.

Here are some tips you can pass along to your friend:*

- Tell someone. Talk about your emotions even if it feels like you're being emotionally selfish.
- Find a counselor who has worked with other cutters.
- Try to locate what makes you want to hurt yourself and work with someone to create a plan for how to handle those situations.
- Be accountable to someone. Ask an adult or mature friend to ask you the tough questions, and be honest in return.
- Pray. Ask God to help you and send people into your life who can help you.
- Find alternative emotional outlets. Color, draw, write in a journal, play music, etc...
- Do not let it continue. The progressive addictive nature of this disorder can be life threatening. Address it now before it becomes more serious.

*Tips taken from *"Hurting Beyond Words – The Silent Agony of Self-Injury"* by Rachel a.v. Nelson

For you, just be there for your friend. Make sure you're not afraid to ask the tough questions, especially if it's to the point of being serious. If you have any thought that it's serious, you must talk with someone. Try to hook them up with a youth pastor, school counselor or other trusted adult. Someone who is experienced with this type of situation will try to help her find a constructive way to deal with pain rather than letting pain control her. We can't make all the pain go away, but we don't have to let pain rule our choices.

Articles are written by Bob Lenz, Tiffany Thompson and other national youth communicators with Life Promotions Inc., a non-profit youth organization committed to instilling hope, worth and value in youth.