

Cutting and Eating Disorders (Self-harming behaviors) Important Information for Parents

Understanding self-harming behaviors such as cutting and eating disorders underlie the most important piece of helping your child stop these harmful behaviors. The good news is that most who cut and have eating disorders do not want to die. These self-harming behaviors are your child's clever way to manage their painful emotions. Perhaps the best way to help understand this effect is to refer to Plante's quote from 2007 "the brain serves as a 24 hour pharmacy". The endorphins released in the brain with self-harming behaviors are opiates that numb out the difficult emotions. For this reason, it is important for parents to get help as early as possible to interrupt the potential addictive cycle that can occur with these behaviors. These children and adolescents often report feeling "invisible", "no one cares", "no one listens to me". It is important to also understand the problem, which is complex, rather than blame your child, yourself or the other parent.

The following are important for parents to consider in helping their child with these behaviors:

Do:

- Become aware of the signs and symptoms of cutting and eating disorders such as cuts and scratches on arms and legs, bloody tissues in the bathroom, emotional shutting down, excessive time in the bathroom, hiding food, weight loss or gain.
- Learn as much as possible about these behaviors
- Engage in neutral and supportive conversations with your child, even if you do not agree with their difficult behavior. Encourage them to talk about their feelings.
- Get help for your child so they learn adaptive coping strategies

Do not:

- Assume your child is not suicidal. It is best they are evaluated by a professional to rule out suicidal ideations.
- Focus on the cutting, anorexia or bulimia (discuss feelings instead). What you focus on grows and continues.
- Challenge these behaviors; paradoxically, this will increase their likelihood. Again, your child is doing the best they can to find available resources to manage their emotions. A mental health professional knowledgeable about children and adolescents and self-harming behaviors can work with the child and family to better understand, and to learn helpful strategies to resolve these issues.