

Book offers hope to parents of children who self-injure

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Parents who discover their children intentionally hurt themselves—by cutting, carving, scratching or burning their skin—often feel guilty and ashamed, assuming they somehow caused their children's emotional distress.

A new book by experts in [self-injury](#) offers parents hope: assurance that they didn't cause their [child's](#) self-injuring, and guidance on how they can become key allies in helping their child heal.

"Having a child self-injure can be so hard and feel so dark at times. Our intention was to inform, encourage and support caretakers," said Cornell University professor Janis Whitlock, co-author of "Healing Self-Injury: A Compassionate Guide for Parents and Other Loved Ones" (Oxford University Press), available Feb. 4.

The book is based on extensive research—including Whitlock's work as director of the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. The book's vivid anecdotes are drawn from the researchers' in-depth interviews with real families in recovery from self-injury.

Co-written with Elizabeth Lloyd-Richardson of the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, "Healing Self-Injury" focuses on life after parents or caregivers have discovered their child is involved in non-suicidal self-injury—self-injury that is not intended to end one's life. The book covers the background and basics of self-injury, why people do it and, most importantly, how parents and loved ones can help their child, their families and themselves.

Commonly known as "cutting," non-suicidal self-injury is best understood as a way of coping with stressful emotions and thoughts, the authors say. The relief from the physical pain of a self-injury essentially tricks the brain into perceiving relief from emotional pain too. Self-injury can include such behaviors as embedding objects in the skin and swallowing toxic substances. Most people who self-injure also deal with other mental health challenges. And it is far more common than most people know; between 12 and 37 percent of all teenagers and [young adults](#) have self-injured at some point in their lives.

Parenting is generally not the critical factor in causing a child to self-injure; it has more to do with how [children](#) perceive themselves and their environment.

"So much of self-injury is giving voice to emotional experiences. It's a way to take an amorphous, emotional cloud of stuff and focus it and control it," said Whitlock.

Parents are not only critical allies in setting the stage for a child's ability to recover and thrive, but are also the most helpful confidants a self-injuring child has—even more useful than peers and therapists, said Whitlock.

"There's an authentic self—a self that exists from the time the child arrives on the planet—that a parent or caretaker has some connection to," she said.

"There's something about that relationship that can be a very healing agent in this process."

She encourages parents to simply bear witness to a child's perceived emotional wounds, rather than try to fix them. "That's what a lot of kids in our research said: 'When my parents can just listen, when they can just be present with me, it makes a big difference.' It opens the door to a tremendous healing capacity."

The book also encourages parents to get support for themselves, such as therapy or by confiding in a trusted friend. "We try to validate the number and depth of the hard emotions that will come up for a parent," she said. "It's very disconcerting to see wounds on your child's body or see blood left on a sink."

By taking care of themselves and finding healthy ways to deal with the emotions related to the child's self-injury, [parents](#) are modeling how to deal with difficult issues—which is what the children must learn to do for themselves.

"Demonstrate to your child—even if it's new to you—how to be authentic. That modeling of authenticity, even if it's messy, awkward or really uncomfortable, is important," Whitlock said. "It's in these hard places where you can most easily find the experience of being an authentic person. It's where the seeds of hope and growth are."

Provided by Cornell University

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