

Learning to live without self-harm

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Most survivors who self-harm, at some point, ask the question "How do I learn to not SI?". This discussion attempts to make some suggestions that may assist you when moving away from self-harming behavior, although the use of a therapist during this time is strongly recommended.

How can I prepare myself to stop self-harming?

- The very first thing to understand and believe is that it is possible to live and cope without self-harm in your life. Having said that, learning not to self-injure can be a long and difficult road, and so it may be worth exploring with yourself first whether YOU feel ready to start this journey.
- Probably the single most important thing to ask yourself is whether you want to stop self-harming. Although other people around you may exert pressure on you to stop, ultimately you are the one that has to make the commitment to stop – and so your desire to achieve this is of the most vital importance. Maybe you could make a list of all the reasons why you want to stop – and then keep this list with you to refer to when the going gets tough.
- It's a good idea to ensure that you have a good support system in place so that you have someone to turn to when you need it. This support system could consist of family, friends, a partner, a therapist....infact anyone that you trust enough to be there in the capacity that you need them to be there. Obviously if you can have a several people in your support group then that is ideal because it increases the chance that one of them will be available to sit with you on the phone, or to come over to you, when you need someone to be with you.
- It is a good idea to talk to your doctor (if you feel able) and tell him that you are planning on stopping self-injury. He may be able to help you to manage your anxiety, either with medication or by referring you to someone who would be able to provide you with techniques to help you manage anxiety.

- It's worth having a list of crisis hotlines to call if you cannot get hold of members in your support system, or you feel it would be easier to talk to someone else. Also, many crisis lines are open 24/7 and you may not feel able to call a friend in the middle of the night!
- It might help you to prepare an action plan of what to do when the urge to self-harm hits you. What is on this list will probably differ for each person, but hopefully you will get some ideas from some of the information below.
- Get rid of any implements you use to self-harm to make it harder for you to act on the spur of the moment. However, some people say that they feel that keeping the implements and choosing not to use them leaves them with a greater sense of power - so you need to decide what is right for you.
- Try to prepare yourself for the fact that initially you may experience very intense emotions when you do not self-harm despite wanting to. You may feel scared, anxious, tearful, frustrated – and a whole lot of other emotions. But these feelings WILL pass, and they will not stay with you forever.
- Remind yourself that you are doing this because you deserve to have a better life and to live one free from self – harm.

When I feel the need to self-harm, what can I do instead?

In order to successfully not self-harm, it will be necessary to replace this self-harming behavior with something else. It makes sense that if you understand the specific function that self-injuring plays for you, then it may be easier to select a replacement behavior. Bear in mind that often it is a matter of trial and error to work out which replacement is most effective for you as what may work well for one person may not for another, and vice versa.

If you SI to deal with anger / frustration:

- Try expressing that anger / frustration in a different way.
- Punch a pillow
- Scream
- Rip up an old phone book
- Throw ice cubes hard against a wall

- Do something physically tiring i.e. work-out, go for a swim or a run, clean the whole house, dance to loud music.
- Vent about how you are feeling – either outloud to yourself, or to someone in your support network. Write it all out on paper. Post it at Pandys.

If you SI because you feel numb or dissociated:

- Try to connect you yourself in a physical sense:
- Hold ice cubes or a packet of frozen vegetables.
- Take a cold shower.
- Read an extract from your diary / blog and try to identify with those feelings.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Stomp on the ground or clap your hands.
- Look at photographs of you with family / friends.
- Phone a friend.

If you SI in order to be able to focus / ground yourself from painful emotions

- Try doing something that requires a lot of concentration.
- Name the things you can see in the room you are in in as much detail as possible.
- Play a computer game.
- Do something creative i.e. painting, write a poem, knit.
- Do a puzzle.
- Research a topic you are interested in and write about it.

If you SI in order to feel calm:

- Try to create a peaceful, tranquil environment that is free from distractions:
- Take a bubble bath.
- Concentrate on your breathing – breathing slowly and deeply with your eyes closed.
- Do yoga or pilates or stretching exercises.

If you SI in order to punish yourself:

- Make a list of things you like about yourself and read them outloud.

- Have an intense work out session, where may feel uncomfortable, but ultimately is good for you.
- Take a cold shower.

Is there anything else I can modify to make it easier?

Self-injury can become very ritualized and therefore small modifications of our behavior and our environment, can result in less triggers to SI.

- **Change your environment.**

If you can identify a particular time of the day or place when you are more likely to feel like self-harming, then you could actually alter the pattern of your behavior during this time to lessen the triggers to SI. For example, if you are more likely to SI in the evening when home alone, try to arrange to have a friend there for some of this time, or start an evening class etc. By changing the situation you are in at your most vulnerable times, you can make it much more difficult to SI.

- **Get support**

Most people SI when they are alone, and therefore if you increase the amounts of time that you are around people, then you can decrease the number of opportunities you have to SI. Also by connecting with others, it can decrease any feelings of isolation that can accompany SI.

By enlisting the support of a therapist, and being given the opportunity to talk through your issues, you can be given another outlet in which to deal with feelings of isolation, sadness, anger, frustration – and other feelings that may be linked to your SI.

- **Challenge the accuracy of negative thought:**

On many occasions, negative thoughts about ourselves can precede self-injury. Although we may feel that these negative thoughts are true, very often by challenging them, the

strength of their validity diminishes. For example, if you think “I’m stupid!” try to think of all those times in your life where you haven’t been stupid – like when you have scored well in a test, or been able to help a friend, or learnt something you couldn’t do before.

- **Stop negative thoughts**

If you can identify that you are starting to think negative thoughts about yourself, you can stop these by saying “STOP!”. You can either say “Stop!” out loud or in your head, and it may take a while to master the technique, but when you do, lessening the negative thoughts can help to lessen the need to SI.

- **Reframe your thoughts.**

With this technique, you learn to change everything negative into something positive.

So, for example:

“I’m so stupid for failing” can become:

“Even the most gifted people fail sometimes. I will use this experience and learn from it”

“I’m so weak” can become:

“I have survived many things and I’m still standing”

- **Take care of yourself.**

Learning to take care of yourself may take some effort, but by taking care of your physical self, you are sending a message to your inner self that you are worth caring about. Start exercising, whether just gentle walks, swimming or working out. Try to eat healthily. Drink plenty of water. Try to get plenty of rest. Take some time out of your day – whether just 15 minutes or a couple of hours – to do something that is just for you.

Remember that YOU are the one in control.

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