

Caring for youth with non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)



An approach that works: You want to be SAFE.

S	Stress	Focus on the distress , circumstances, and emotional triggers leading to the NSSI, rather than focusing on the injuries themselves.
A	Accept	Recognize that NSSI is a coping mechanism and their best attempt to feel better. Approach with empathy, compassion, and refrain from judging.
F	Foundation	Establish a foundation of trust and openness , ensuring they feel they can come to you without fear of punishment, and that you are there to help.
E	Examine	Examine the wound (if given permission to do so) and ensure that its properly cared for, including seeking medical attention if necessary. Note: One visible wound is not automatic permission to examine their body for other wounds.

A SAFE approach will allow the youth to:

- Feel that they still can control their overwhelming emotions if they need to
- Trust that you will help them if you can
- Know that you are a safe person to talk to if it happens again or gets worse

HELPFUL	UNHELPFUL
Stress Focus	NSSI Focus
“What was upsetting you?”	“What did you use to do this?”
“What made you feel overwhelmed?”	“What were you thinking when you did this?”
“What could I do to help reduce your stress?”	“How can I convince you to stop cutting?”
Accepting	Not Accepting
“I understand how you must feel if that’s what you need to do to feel better.”	“This is just attention seeking.”
“I want you to know I’m not angry.”	“Stop being dramatic.”
Foundation of Trust	Foundation of Fear
“I’m always here to support you no matter what.”	“I’m removing the door from your room.”
“I always want to help before or after, OK?”	“Don’t ever do this again.”
“I care and want to know if it happens again.”	“I never want to see you do something like this.”
Examining Appropriately	Examining Inappropriately
“Can we make sure the cut is alright?”	“I’m calling 9-1-1 for this (small) cut.”
“Let’s get you a bandage and clean shirt, OK?”	“You could have killed yourself, let me see!”
“I think we should go get this looked at.”	“You did it to yourself, you take care of it.”

Important things to remember:

1. NSSI evokes strong fears and emotions due to its appearance, but usually involves minor harm
2. NSSI is serving a purpose, usually to *feel better* or *feel something*
3. The goal is to *understand and prevent the distress* that leads to NSSI
4. The goal is NOT to “stop” the NSSI and leave the youth defenseless against distress
5. NSSI itself is rarely life-threatening, but may need medical attention
6. Safety comes first: if at any point you believe that the danger of the situation is severe, you must call 9-1-1 or immediately go to an emergency department