

Self Help for Self Injury

How do I know if I'm ready to stop?

Deciding to stop self-injury is a very personal decision. You may have to consider it for a long time before you decide that you're ready to commit to a life without scars and bruises. Don't be discouraged if you conclude the time isn't right for you to stop yet; you can still exert more control over your self-injury by choosing when and how much you harm yourself, by setting limits for your self-harm, and by taking responsibility for it. If you choose to do this, you should take care to remain safe when harming yourself. Don't share cutting implements and know basic first aid for treating your injuries.

Alderman (1997) suggests this useful checklist of things to ask yourself before you begin walking away from self-harm. It isn't necessary that you be able to answer all the questions affirmatively, but the more of these things you can set up for yourself, the easier it will be to stop hurting yourself.

While it is not necessary that you meet all of these criteria before stopping self-harm, the more of these statements that are true for you before you decide to stop this behavior, the better.

- I have a solid emotional support system of friends, family, and/or professionals that I can use if I feel like hurting myself.
- There are at least two people in my life that I can call if I want to hurt myself.
- I feel at least somewhat comfortable talking about self-harm with three different people.
- I have a list of at least ten things I can do instead of hurting myself.
- I have a place to go if I need to leave my house so that I won't hurt myself.
- I feel confident that I could get rid of all the things that I might be likely to use to hurt myself.
- I have told at least two other people that I am going to stop hurting myself.
- I am willing to feel uncomfortable, scared, and frustrated.
- I want to stop hurting myself.

How do I stop? And anyway, aren't some of these techniques just as "bad"?

There are several different flat-out-in-the-moment strategies typically suggested, such as doing anything that isn't self-harm and produces intense sensation; squeezing ice, taking a cold bath or hot or cold shower, biting into something strongly flavored (hot pepper, unpeeled lemon, lime, or grapefruit), sex, etc. These strategies work because the intense emotions that provoke self-harm are transient; they come and go like waves, and if you can stay upright through one, you get some breathing room before the next. The more waves you tolerate without falling over, the stronger you become.

But, the question arises, aren't these things equivalent to punishing yourself by cutting or burning or hitting or whatever? The key difference is that they don't produce lasting results. If you squeeze a handful of ice until it melts or stick a couple of fingers into some ice cream for a few minutes, it'll hurt intensely but it won't leave scars, nothing you'll have to explain away later. You most likely won't feel guilty afterwards - a little foolish, maybe, and kind of proud that you weathered a crisis without self-harm, but not guilt.

This kind of distraction isn't intended to cure the roots of your self-harm; you can't run a marathon when you're too tired to cross the room. These techniques serve, rather, to help you get through an intense moment of badness without making things worse for yourself in the long run. They're taining wheels, and they teach you that you can get through a crisis without hurting yourself. You will refine them, even devise more productive coping mechanisms, later, as the urge to self-harm lessens and loses the hold it has on your life. Use these interim methods to demonstrate to yourself that you can cope with distress without permanently injuring your body. Every time you do you score another point and you make self-harm that much less likely next time you are in crisis.

Your first task when you've decided to stop is to break the cycle, to force yourself to try new coping mechanisms. And you do have to force yourself to do this; it doesn't just come. You can't theorize about new coping techniques until one day they're all in place and your life is changed. You have to work, to struggle, to make yourself do different things. When you pick up that knife or that lighter or get ready to hit that wall, you have to make a conscious decision to do something else. At first, the something else will be a gut-level primitive, maybe even punishing thing, and that's okay - the important thing is that you made the decision, you chose to

so something else. Even if you don't make that decision the next time, nothing can take away that moment of mastery, of having decided that you were not going to do it that time. If you choose to hurt yourself in the next crisis time, you will know that it is a choice, which implies the existence of alternative choices. It takes the helplessness out of the equation.

So, what do I do instead?

You can increase the changes that a distraction/substitution will help calm the urge to self-harm by matching what you do to how you are feeling at the moment.

First, take a few moments and look behind the urge. What are you feeling? Are you angry, frustrated, restless, or sad? Are you just craving the feeling of self-harm? Are you depersonalized, unreal, numb, unfocused, or dissociated? Next, match the activity to the feeling. A few examples:

Angry, Frustrated, Restless

(These strategies work better sometimes if you talk to the object you are cutting/tearing/hitting. Start slowly, explaining why you're hurt and angry. It's okay if you end up ranting or yelling; it can help a lot to vent feelings that way.)

- Try something physical and violent, something not directed at a living thing.
- Slash an empty plastic soda bottle, piece of heavy cardboard, old shirt, or sock.
- Make a soft cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself.
- Flatten aluminum cans, seeing how fast you can go.
- Hit a punching bag.
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow-fight style.
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book.
- On a sketch or photo of yourself, make in red ink what you want to do. Cut and tear the picture.
- Make Play-Doh models and cut or smash them.
- Break old china dishes on a cement floor or patio.
- Squeeze, bounce, stretch, and snap Silly Putty.
- Throw ice into the bathtub or against a wall hard enough to shatter the ice.
- Break sticks
- Crank up some music and dance.
- Clean your room or house.
- Go for a jog, a walk, or a run.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball, racquet ball or tennis.

Sad, Soft, Melancholic, Depressed, Unhappy

- Do something slow and soothing, like taking a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles, curling up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book, babying yourself somehow.
- Do whatever makes you feel taken care of and comfortable.
- Burn sweet-smelling incense.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt.
- Call a friend and just talk about things you like.
- Make a tray of special treats and tuck yourself into bed with it and watch TV or read.
- Visit a friend.

Craving sensation, Feeling depersonalized, Dissociating, Feeling unreal

Do something that creates a sharp, physical sensation:

- Squeeze ice hard or squeeze it until it is completely melted.
- Put a finger into a frozen food or put ice, water, and salt in a pitcher and put your hand in it.
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of gingerroot.
- Rub liniment under your nose.
- Slap a tabletop with force.
- Snap your wrist with a rubber band.

- Take a cold bath.
- Stomp your feet on the ground.
- Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.

Wanting focus

- Do a task that is exacting and requires focus and concentration (i.e. computer games, needlework).
- Eat a raisin or an orange mindfully.
- Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can.
- Choose a random object, like a paper clip, and try to write 30 different uses for it.
- Pick a subject and research it on the web.

Wanting to see blood

- Draw on yourself with a red felt-tip pen.
- Take a small bottle of liquid red food coloring and warm it slightly by dropping it into a cup of hot water for a few minutes. Uncap the bottle and press its tip against the place you want to cut. Draw the bottle in a cutting motion while squeezing it slightly to let the food color trickle out.
- Draw on the areas you want to cut using ice that you've made by dropping six or seven drops of red food color into each of the ice-cube tray wells.
- Paint yourself with red tempera paint.

Wanting to see scars or pick scabs

Get a henna tattoo kit. You put the henna on as a paste and leave it overnight; the next day you can pick it off as you would a scab and it leaves an orange-red mark behind.

Another thing that helps is the fifteen-minute game. Tell yourself that if you still want to harm yourself in 15 minutes, you can. When the time is up, see if you can go another fifteen minutes.