

As a parent of a child and young adult, and more than likely an adult that self-harms, I can still remember the first time realising what she was doing. I was terrified (bearing in mind this is about twenty years ago now) I didn't know what to say, or if to say anything, or how to help her. She was under CAMHS and was selectively Mute.

I learnt over many years to try and be very practical about it, to not get emotional in any sense but to be supportive and try and encourage her to tell me. That is a big trust issue and its easy to blow it by asking too many questions or becoming upset or angry.

I soon learnt that there was no way to stop her, apart from removing all the obvious things from around the house, but she still managed to find things.

In her case the self-harm started as scratches and very shallow cuts, but over time this became not enough, During the early days I tried everything I could think of, I tried to get angry, I tried to be kind and understanding. But in that lies guilt – as a Mother what am I doing? Am I actively encouraging her to self-harm – facilitating her abuse of her own body?

This was when my daughter was early teens, so communication was also challenging naturally, but she was very secretive about it, and a few cuts ended up infected, so we both learnt to talk about a very taboo subject.

I bought dressings and antiseptic and left them in the bathroom so she could access them as and when she needed too. She promised me that as soon as one got infected even slightly she would say.

I did not want to live like this, I did not want to be a part of what she was doing to herself, but in a way we both had to face it head on. She wouldn't stop, therefore I HAD to find a way of helping her to initially look after hr wounds, and then a day or so after the self harm I would try and talk with her about other ways.....

I think she regrets it now she has her own children, I know she did when she was pregnant as lots of professionals saw her DSH. If I could say something I wish there were people brave enough who have come through self-harming to tell young people that these scars are lifelong – that sounds really patronising but I know many, many adults now that are not proud of their scars and have to hide themselves with long sleeves etc.

I know that lots of people almost wear them with a sense of pride that they survived and still fighting for recovery. I am proud of my daughter, scars and all. But I wish there had been another way for her to release her pain and torment.

Short pieces of advice:

Be calm, don't shout at them or shake your head when you find out – that initial disclosure or discovery the DSH can often be the template for how they move forwards in the future and whether they allow you to help or not.

Try to listen without panicking.

Become practical around them when it's needed, keep your emotional responses to one side or you will add to their burden of guilt. (You can cry afterwards or beat a pillow).

This is not your fault – you haven't made them self-harm.

Also be very careful of the emotional fear you will have that if you and that person have a falling out they will Self-harm. If you are a parent this is a tough balancing act!

Be kind to yourself – this is tough!

Voice of a Carer