



# Sally

MY TEENAGE DAUGHTER IS SELF-HARMING AND BUYING MEDICATION OFF THE INTERNET. HOW CAN I HELP?

I recently discovered my 16-year-old daughter has been self-harming on her abdomen. I don't know how long it has been going on for or how severe it is. She is very private and I am fearful that making an issue of it might make the situation worse, but equally, I am scared of doing nothing. I found some anti-anxiety medication she bought off the internet, so I suspect she acknowledges she has a problem and is trying to find a less physically harmful way of dealing with it. Yet she clearly feels unable to talk to anyone. I have been on and off antidepressants for anxiety, rather than depression, so there must have been times when I was off-balance and she was aware of it. I don't know where to begin. Can you help?

I have been worrying about your letter all week, going over and over it in my mind to find a way of offering some comfort. I know you are aware that I have a depressive illness myself, as does my daughter, who suffers badly, so I understand how frightening it can be. What truly concerns me is not only that your daughter is buying medication off the internet, which is horribly dangerous – and could be just as physically harmful – but that she is cutting on her abdomen so the wounds won't show. There is a worrying trend among teenagers of copycat self-harm, but it is usually restricted to scratches on wrists and is, according to my girl's peer group, a perverse form of one-upmanship that soon passes.

True self-harm, in whatever form, is a coping mechanism. My daughter went through a period of not eating which, as she put it, was a way of using the pain of hunger to distract her from the pain in her mind.

Your daughter may be aware of your struggle with anxiety disorder, but I really hope you are not blaming yourself. It may be that she is protecting you, because she doesn't want to be a cause of further anxiety, but rather than seeing our struggles as a problem, we might see them as an advantage because we are able to empathise. There is no greater comfort than true understanding.

The problem is: where to begin? Certainly not with face-to-face confrontation or any indication we know what they have been

doing. They feel guilty enough without us adding to their shame. I found car journeys useful, because I could gently wind in and out of a conversation with my daughter without her feeling she was being challenged or, worse, judged. Even if there is minimal response, it creates awareness that we are sympathetic and open to listening, and lets them know that the cradle of motherly love and support is always there. Telling our own stories (although not in great detail) can also be helpful, because sharing creates intimacy.

Most important, the approach should be slow and gentle. It is no use marching them off to a GP or insisting on counselling. We may gradually lead them along the path to that conclusion, and immediately organise help when they ask for it, but using force is counterproductive as it drives them even further into secrecy.

You mention that you have contacted various organisations, who have given helpful advice, which is wonderful because you will know what to do when your daughter eventually opens up – and she will, although it may take some time. And, however much it does not seem so at the moment, it is a blessing she has a mother like you, rather than being dismissed as a kid with adolescent mood swings, which is too often the case. ❖

Follow Sally on Twitter at @SallyBrampton

## SALLY'S RESCUE REMEDIES



### FOCUS ON THE GOOD

Make a daily gratitude list. Research shows that by focusing on the good in our lives rather than dwelling on the bad, we take a step towards the bright side of the road. It is especially good for that early-morning funk.



### BE YOURSELF; EVERYONE ELSE IS ALREADY TAKEN

Oscar Wilde

### DIY FACIAL MASSAGE

Our face is a map of emotion, etched with anxiety, lined with worry, or creased with anger. It holds far more tension than we realise, which is why, after a facial, we often feel brighter and lighter. As it is incredibly difficult to self-massage, Facialift by Sarah Chapman, a brilliant skincare specialist, is a useful little gadget. It is also a complexion booster, helping to firm skin and give a rosy glow. Facialift, £25; victoriahealth.com



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If you have a dilemma, please send a short email to Sally at [sally.brampton@sunday-times.co.uk](mailto:sally.brampton@sunday-times.co.uk).

We're sorry, but Sally cannot answer letters personally