

# Equipping parents to support youth who self-injure: Essentials and recommendations

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# Workshop Outline

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NSSI in Youth



Impact on Parents



Equipping Parents to Support their Youth

# Workshop Outline

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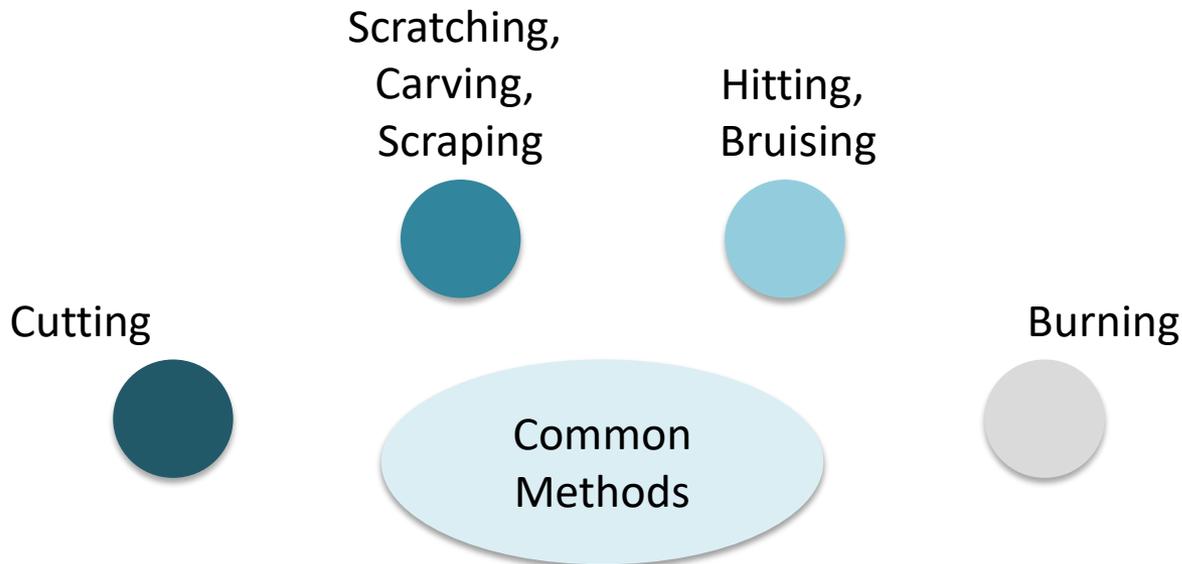
NSSI in Youth

# What is Self-Injury?

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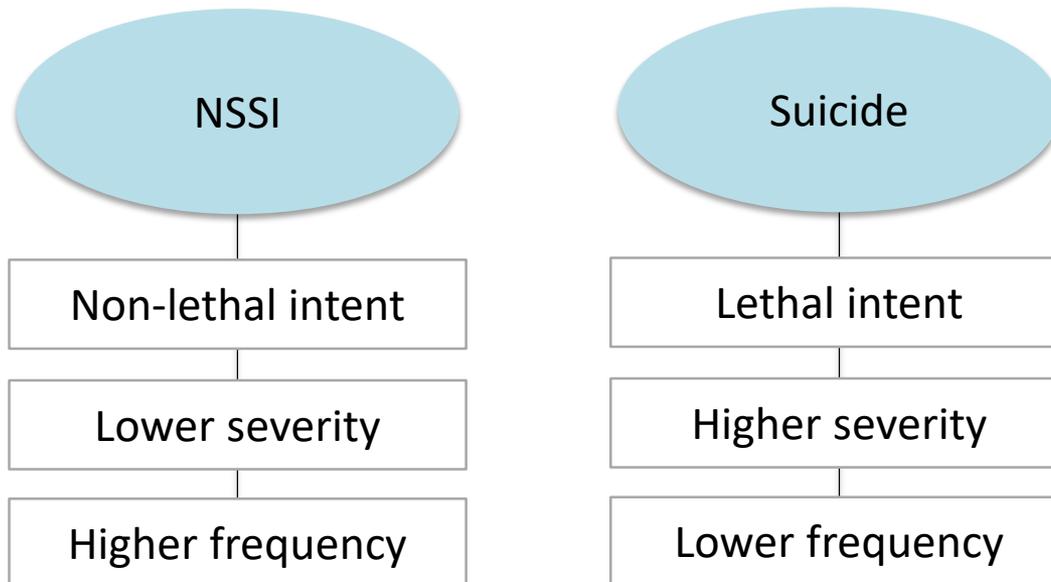
## Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI):

The deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes not culturally/socially sanctioned.



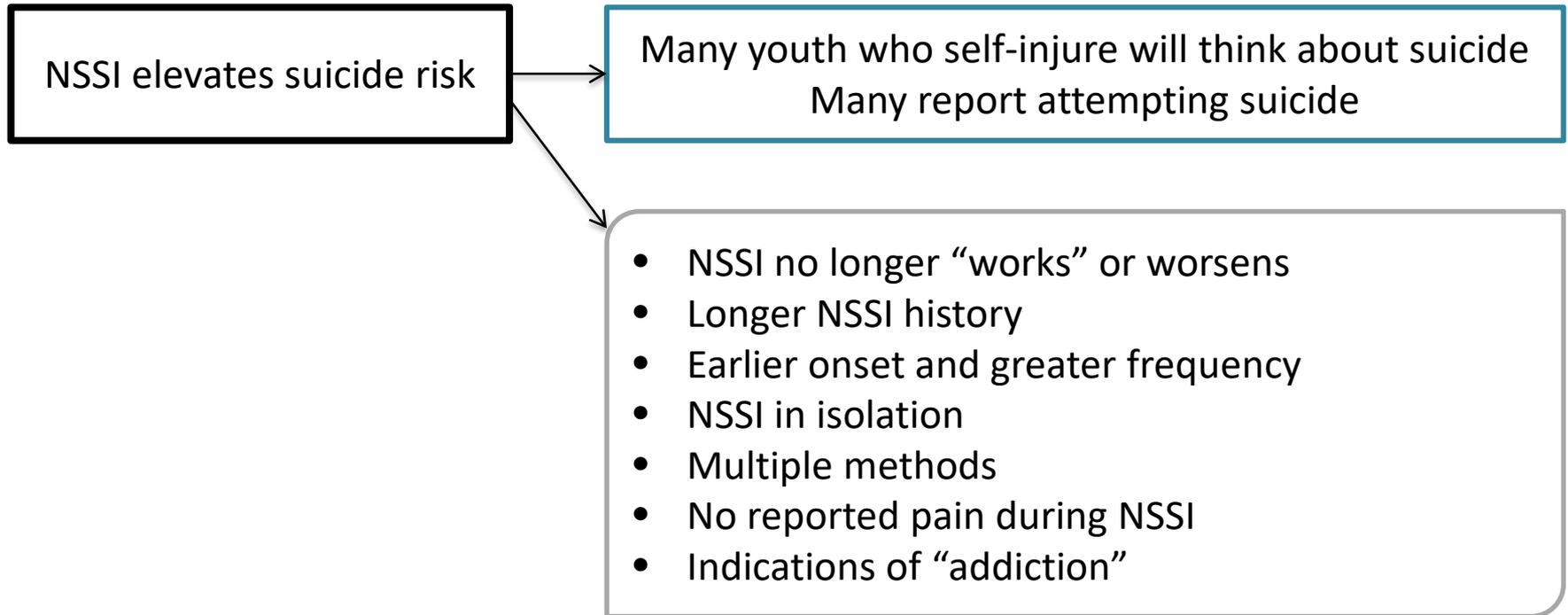
# NSSI vs. Suicide

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# NSSI vs. Suicide

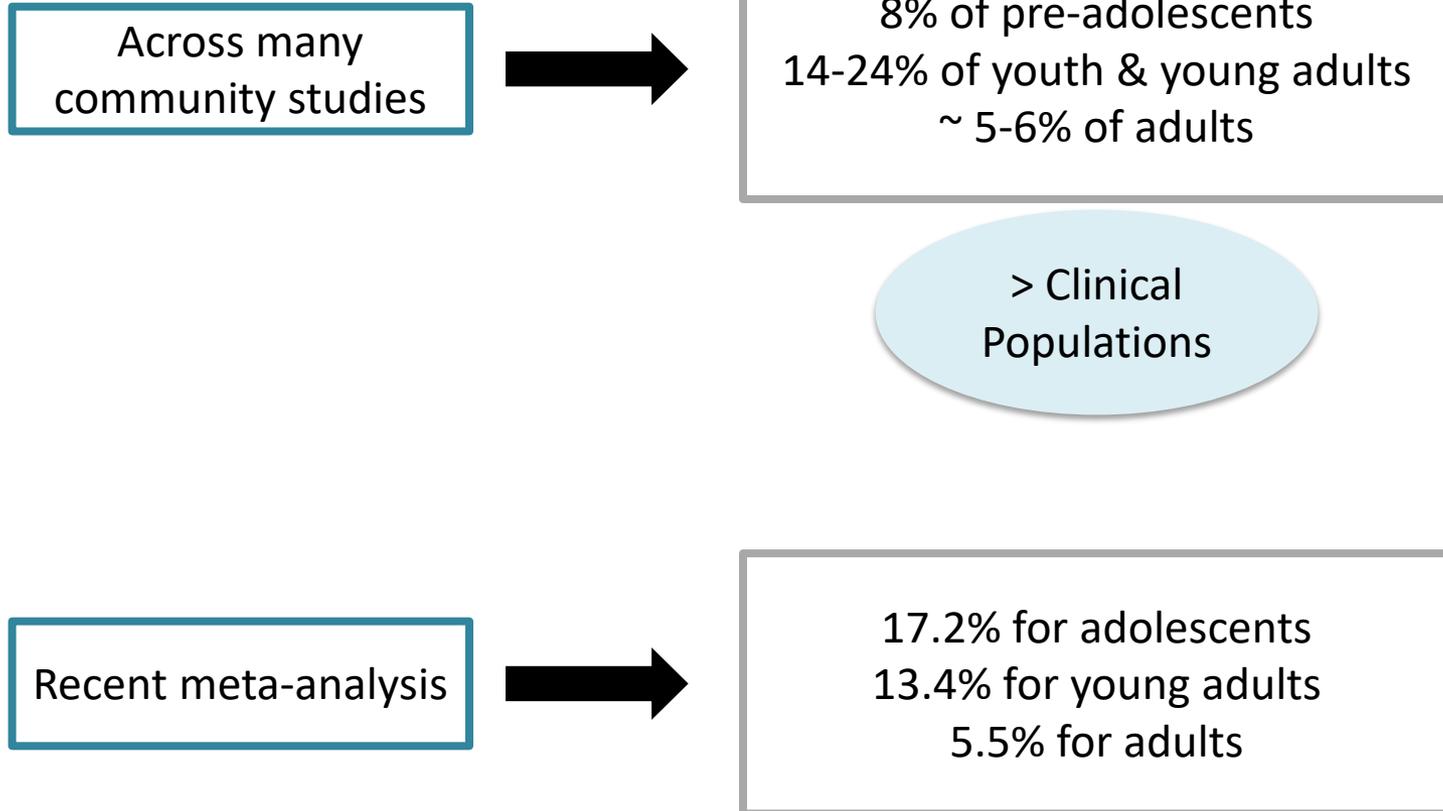
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Suicide risk assessment is critical in the context of working with clients who engage in NSSI initially & on an ongoing basis

# Who self-injures?

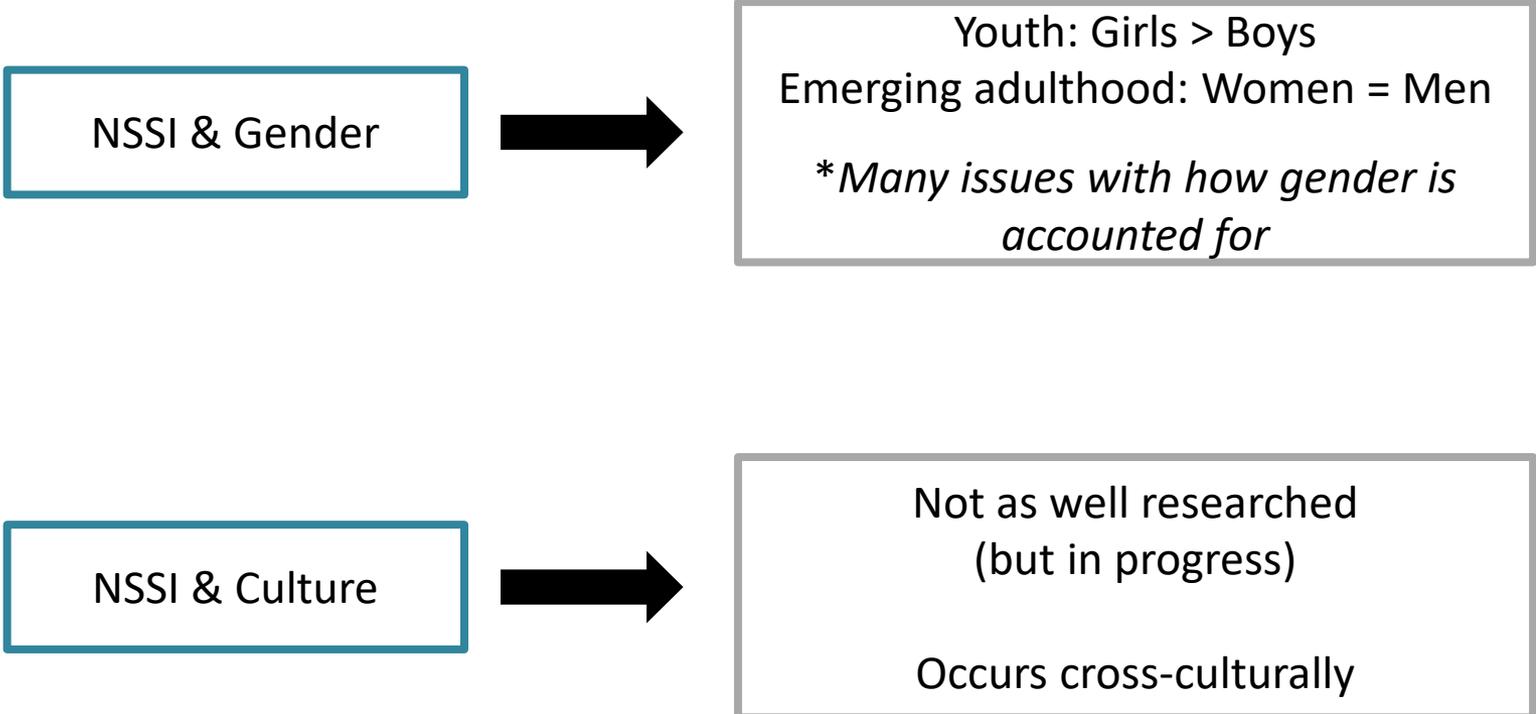
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# Who self-injures?

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NSSI & Gender



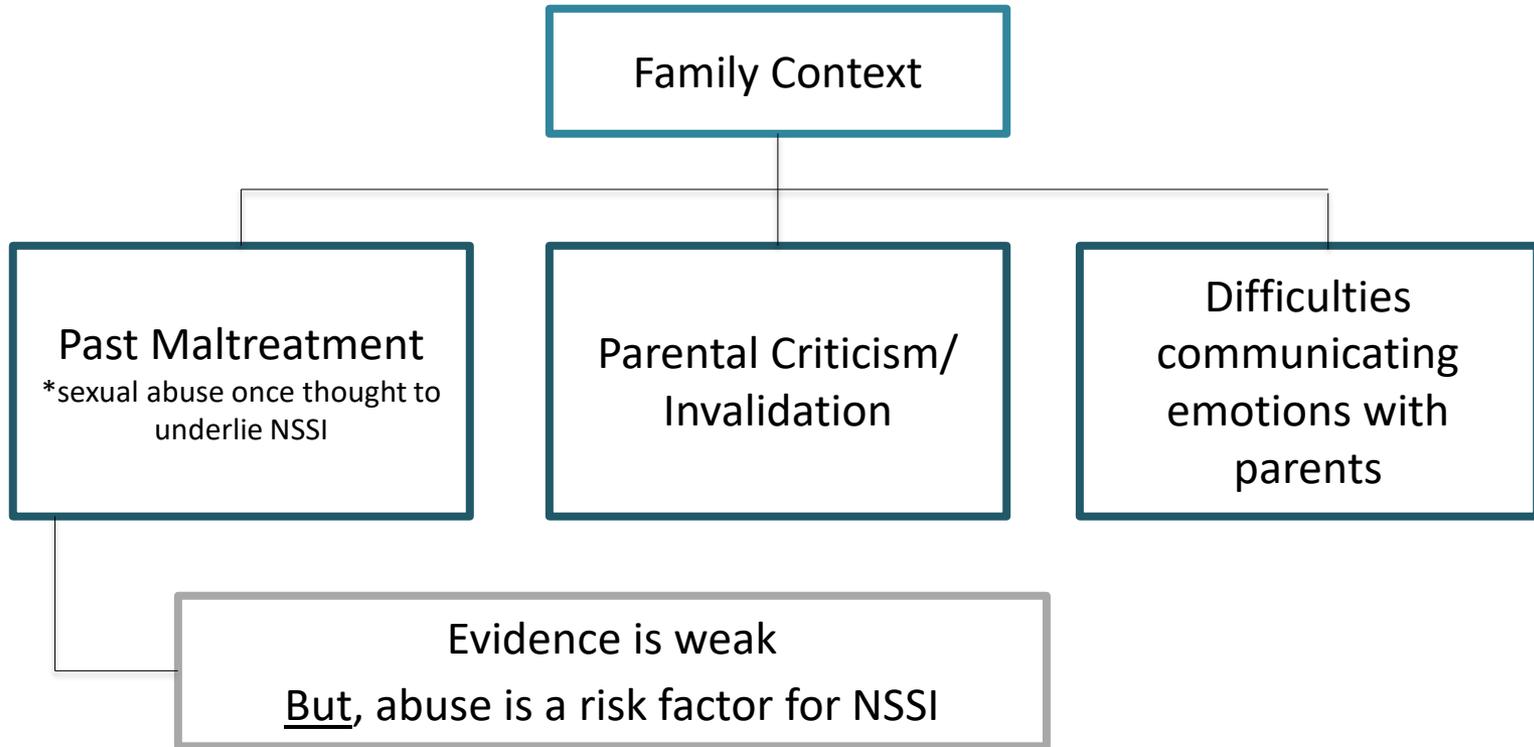
Youth: Girls > Boys  
Emerging adulthood: Women = Men  
*\*Many issues with how gender is accounted for*

NSSI & Culture

Not as well researched  
(but in progress)  
Occurs cross-culturally

# Why do people self-injure?

## Family Related Factors:

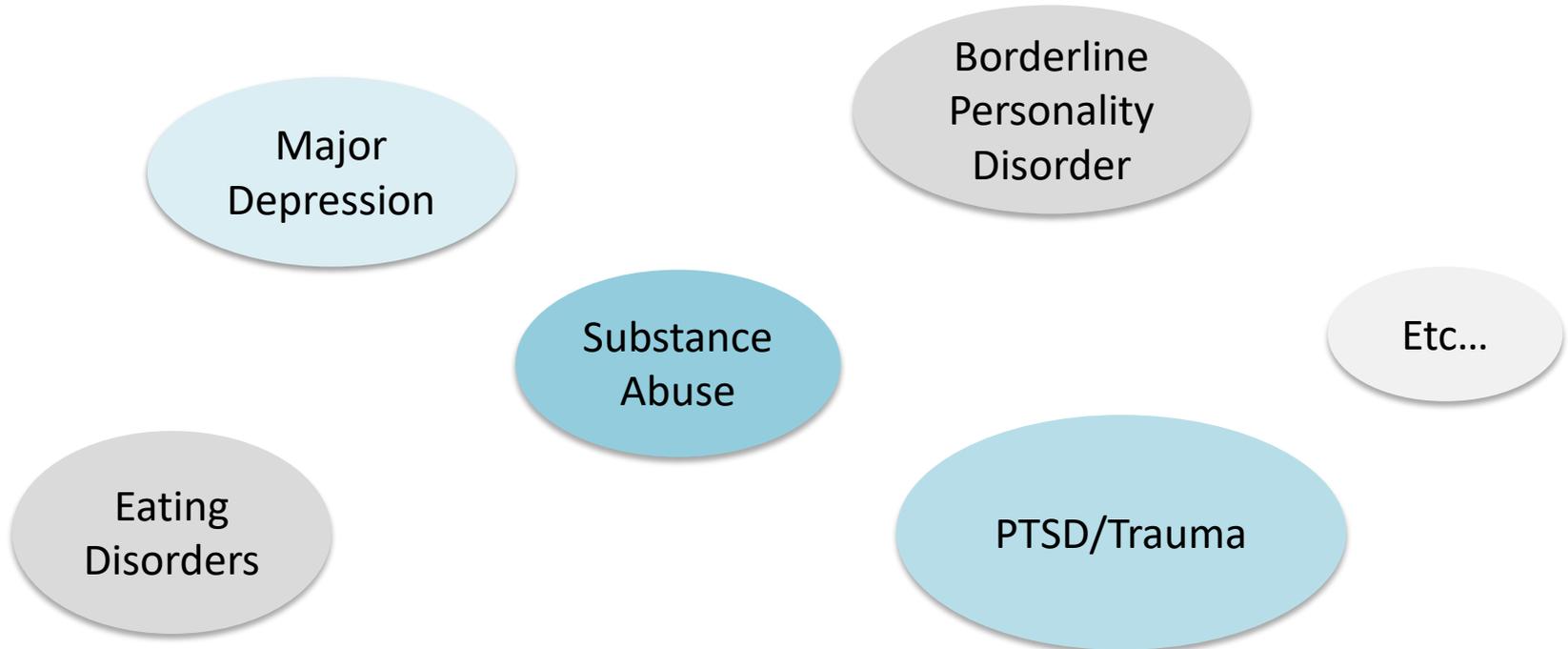


**\*NSSI may also occur in families where these factors are absent**

# Why do people self-injure?

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## Mental Illness(es):

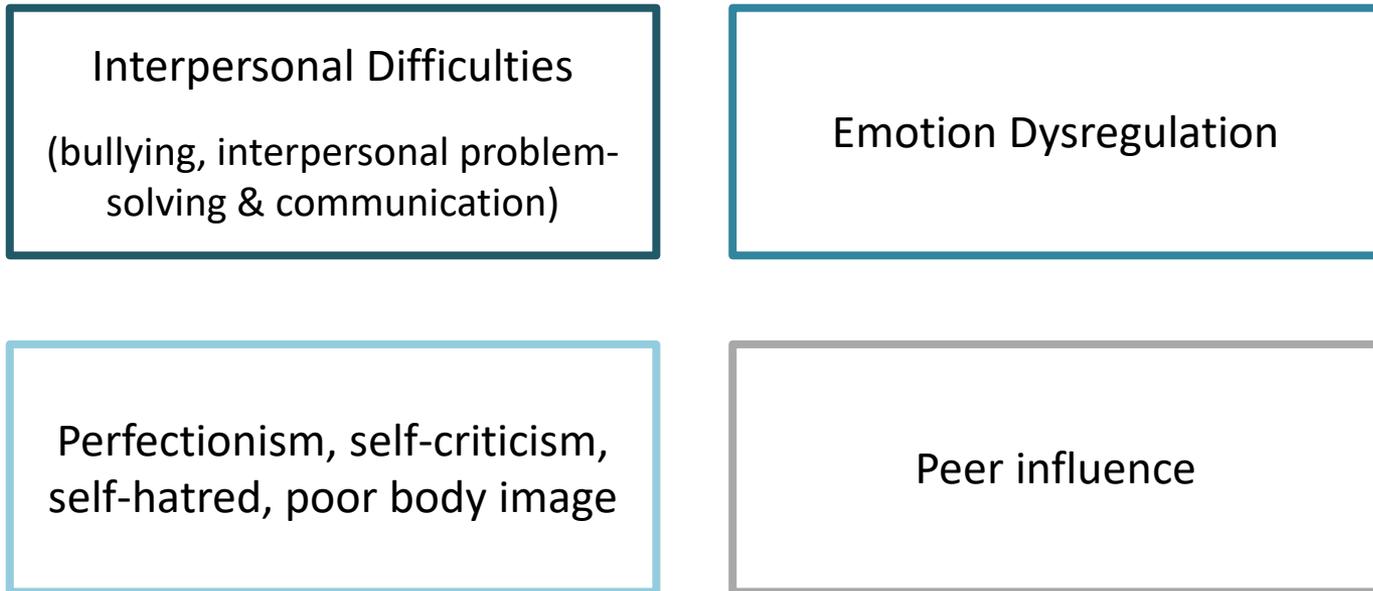


**\*NSSI also occurs in the absence of a mental illness**

# Why do people self-injure?

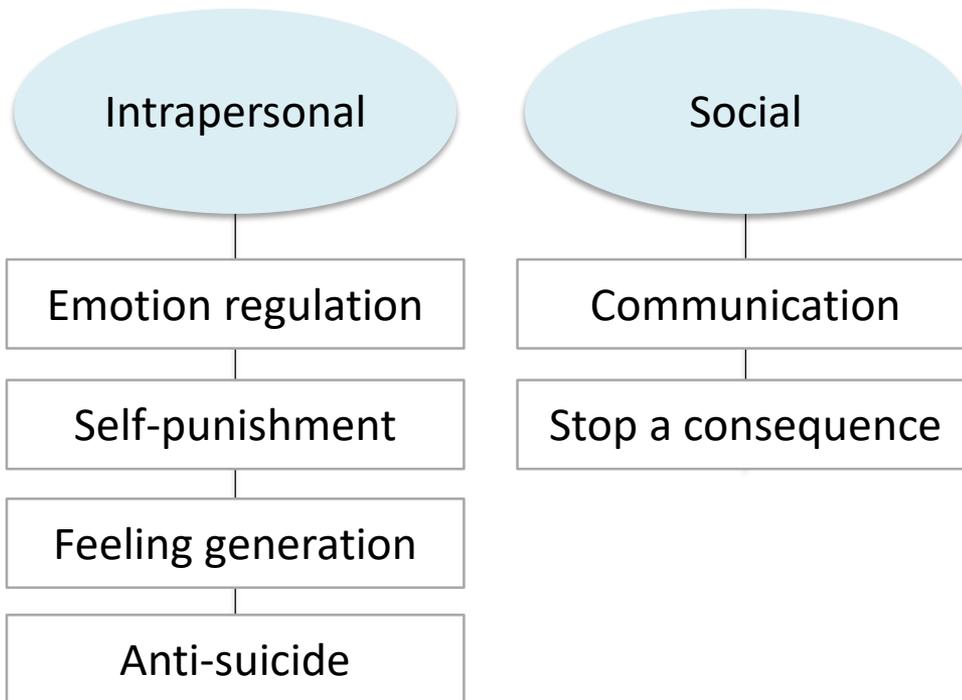
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## Other factors...



# Why do people self-injure?

## Reasons for NSSI...



Many youth will report multiple reasons  
Reasons may change over time  
(over course of NSSI)

**Youth may have difficulty describing “why” they self-injure**

# Interventions

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Although there are currently no well-established interventions for NSSI in youth, there are several comprehensive guides on the assessment and treatment of NSSI in youth:

- Klonsky, E. D., Muehlenkamp, J. J., Lewis, S. P., & Walsh, B. (2011). *Non-suicidal self-injury*. Hogrefe & Huber: Cambridge, MA.
- Nixon, M. K., & Heath, N. L. (2009). *Self-Injury in youth: The essential guide to assessment and intervention*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group
- Washburn, J. J., Richards, S. L., Styer, D. M., Gebhardt, M., Juzwin, K. R., Yourek, A., & Aldridge, D. (2012). Psychotherapeutic approaches to non-suicidal self-injury in adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 6(1), 1-8.
- Additional resources for mental health professional are listed at the end of this presentation

# Interventions

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Select  
Guidelines

Cognitive and behavioural interventions may be the most promising

Skills training (emotion regulation, distress tolerance, problem-solving, interpersonal and communication skills) for youth and family

Contingency management strategies and relapse prevention plans

# Interventions

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Parent  
Inclusion

- Some parental responses (e.g., comfort, validation, support) may protect against NSSI or encourage NSSI cessation.
- Inclusion of parent components (e.g., family skills training, parent education and training) is common across the interventions with the most evidence.
- Involvement of parents in youth's treatment may have a positive impact on parent and family functioning.

*\* There may be times when involving parents is inappropriate or not feasible*

# NSSI in Youth: Case Study

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Your client is a young person who has a low mood and self-injures. Their parents are concerned, but supportive, and report that their youth never talks to them anymore. The youth reports that their parents are currently unaware of the self-injury and the youth does not want to worry them by telling them about it. The youth reports wanting to “just feel better”.

How would you begin to conceptualize this case?

What are some additional things you might want to know?

How would you go about considering interventions?

# Workshop Outline

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NSSI in Youth



Impact on Parents

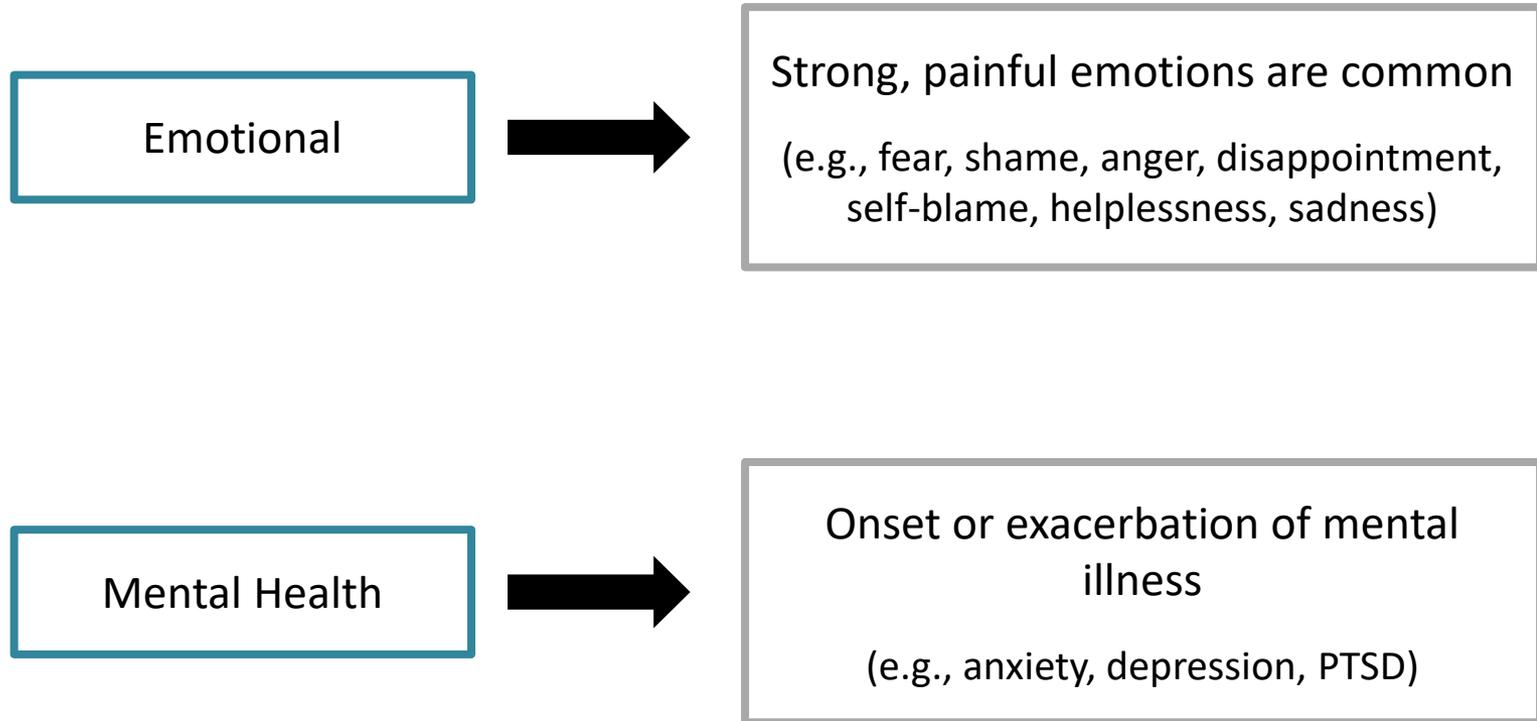
# Impact on Parents

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[Self-Injury: A Parent's Story](#)

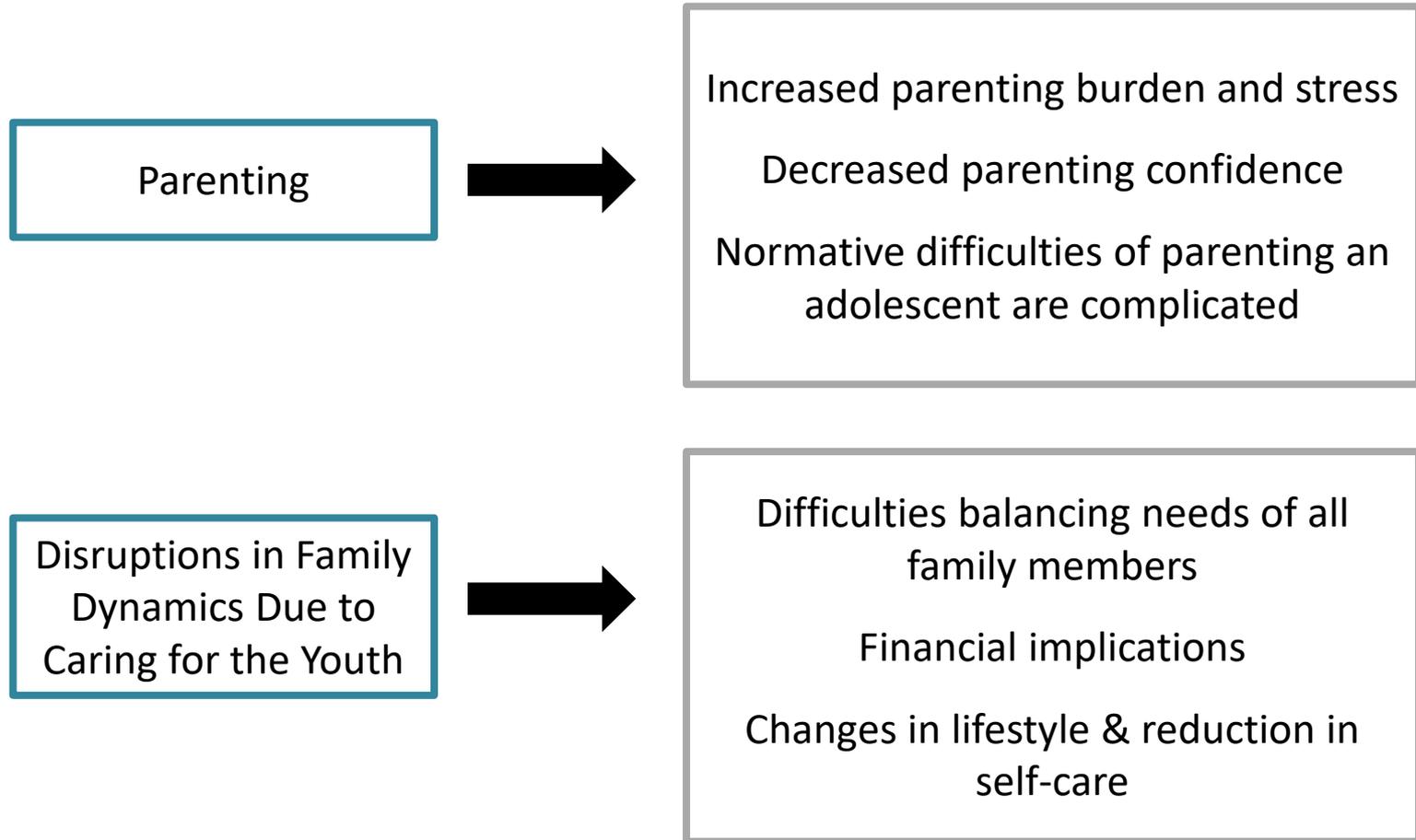
# Impact on Parents

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# Impact on Parents

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# Impact on Parents

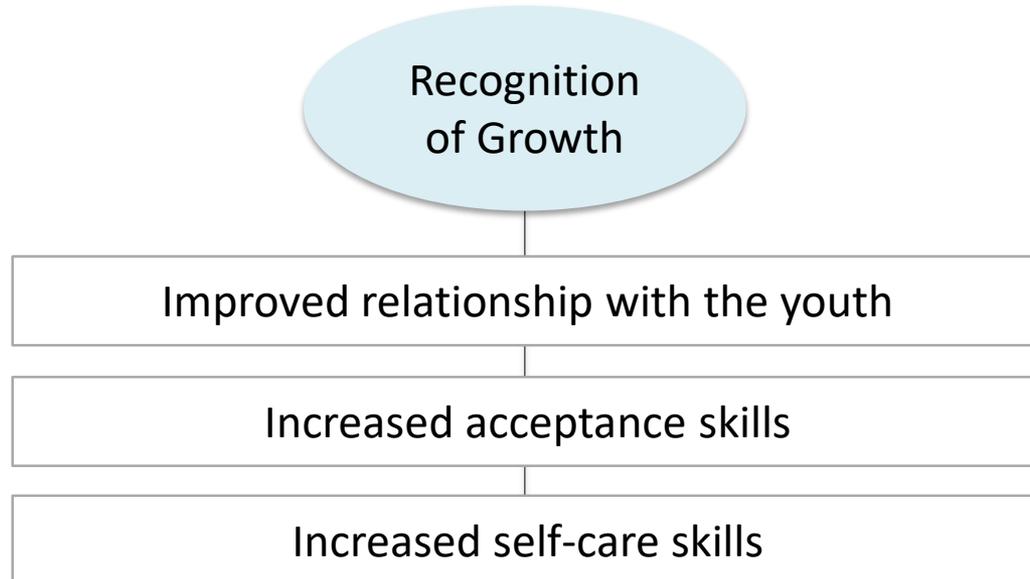
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*“Since my daughter went into what I call “the dark valley” I have had to totally re-evaluate my assessment of myself as a parent. In a world where there's really no objective measure of how you're doing as a parent and it's natural to question yourself, the best reassurance that you did a good job is turning out a well-adjusted kid. When my daughter was doing well... I gave myself props for good parenting. Now that she locks herself in her room and self-injures it's hard not to feel like clearly I've done something wrong. This is probably made worse by the fact that she won't talk to us about her emotions. Some of my friends have kids with problems, but they still have these TV sitcom moments where kid opens up to mom, mom says just the right thing, they hug, etc. My kid would rather slice up her arm than share her feelings with me, and it's pretty hard not to take that as a reflection on oneself as a parent.”*

-Study Participant

# Impact on Parents: Not all Negative

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# Impact on Parents: Not all Negative

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*“I have gained even more confidence with my relationship with my son. We have had to have some very difficult conversations regarding the dark places he goes to when he self-injures and it has helped me understand him better and gain more of his trust through the process. I don't believe every parent has the opportunity to have their child confide in them, and because he has, I feel pride in my parenting skills and blessed that he can talk with me.”*

-Study Participant

# Workshop Outline

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NSSI in Youth



Impact on Parents



Equipping Parents to Support their Youth

# When to Include Parents

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Include  
Parents when

Parents are willing to be involved

Parents are able to be involved

Youth is willing to have parents  
involved

May not be  
appropriate  
when

Parent is abusive and/or neglectful

Parent lacks adequate resources to  
support youth  
(e.g., severe mental illness, low  
cognitive functioning, other stressors)

Youth refuses to include parents

# When to Include Parents

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Remember...



- Inclusion of parents is for the youth's benefit *(when the youth is your client)*
- Balance respecting the youth's autonomy with connecting with the parent
- Be proactive with respect to privacy and confidentiality for both the youth and the parent *(especially with regards to safety)*
- The ideal is that parents are involved and invested, but sometimes they won't be, and sometimes they shouldn't be

# Collaborating with the Youth to Include Parents

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Youth may be hesitant  
to include parents



- Highlight how parents could be helpful in the youth's recovery
- Discuss pros and cons of including parents (be sensitive to the youth's perspective)
- Validate the youth's hesitancy
- Negotiate to what extent the parents will be included (respect the youth's autonomy)
- Be firm if issues of safety arise where parents should be included
- Keep the options open through ongoing discussion

# Supporting Parents: Initial Disclosure

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Disclosure of NSSI to parents is often made on behalf of the youth  
*(e.g., by clinicians or school personnel)*

Parents who receive poor support at the time of disclosure may be unlikely to continue to seek help.



It is essential to provide parents with information and support  
at the time of NSSI disclosure

**Parents are the gatekeepers to professional interventions, when warranted.**

# Supporting Parents: Disclosing NSSI to Parents

Do...



- Be aware of your own reactions towards the parent
- Respond to parents with empathy and validation
- Form an alliance with parents
- Provide accurate information and resources
- Help parents understand the functions of NSSI and the youth's experience
- Differentiate between self-injury and suicide; (ensure safety risk is assessed and safety plans are clear, while avoiding overreacting)
- Ensure the parent has adequate supports
- Follow up with parents

Avoid...



- Blaming the parent
- Under- or over-reacting
- Excluding parents from the circle of care

# Supporting Parents: Disclosing NSSI to Parents

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Example wording to use when discussing NSSI with parents:

*Although reasons for self-injury can vary from youth to youth, it's often about coping. It is a way to feel at least some relief from emotions that can be incredibly difficult, painful and intense. For other youth it's about getting a sense of emotional control during moments when young people feel like they have no control at all over how they feel. Many youth see self-harm as the fastest (and often easiest) way to self-soothe at times of turmoil...*

# Supporting Parents: Aligning Parent Expectations

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Parents may need to know that:

- Recovery is not linear
- There may be setback—even after periods of no NSSI
- The youth may not be able to immediately stop NSSI (e.g., the youth may first need to develop alternate skills for coping)
- Even though they may want to talk about the NSSI with their youth, their youth may not be ready
- They can't look after their youth 24/7
- Their youth needs them to take care of themselves, too

# What do Parents Need when Supporting their Youth?

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Once parents are aware of their youth's NSSI, they may need:

Accurate Information

Effective Professional Support

Peer Support

Self-Care

# What do Parents Need when Supporting their Youth?

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Accurate Information

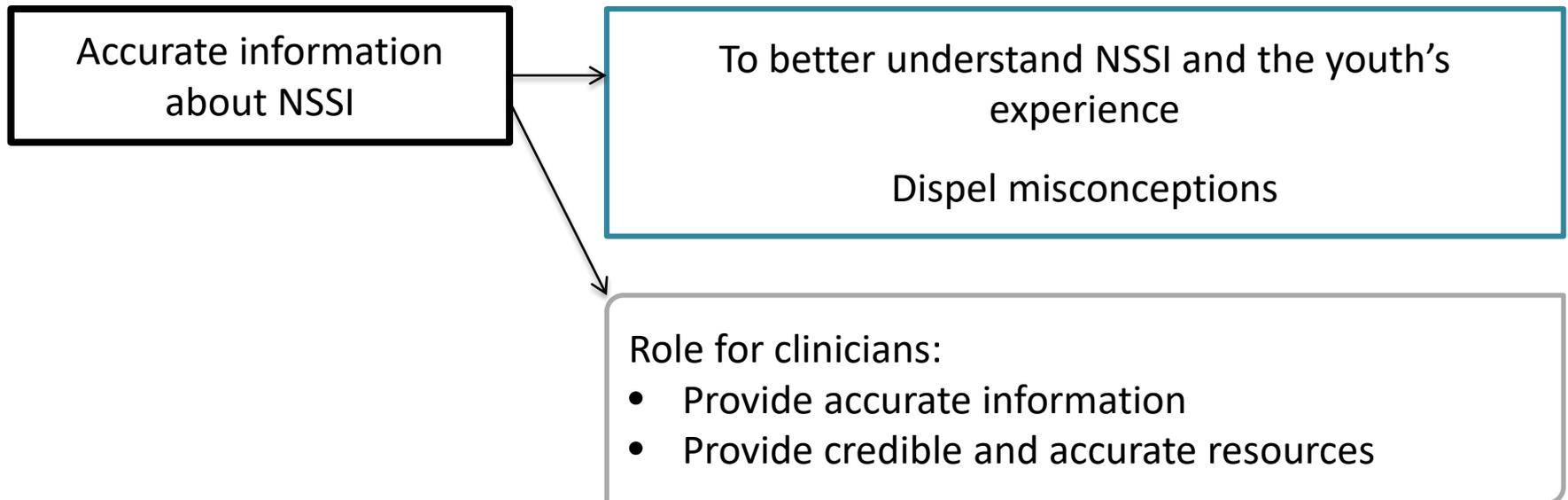
Effective Professional Support

Peer Support

Self-Care

# Supporting Parents: Accurate Information

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**A list of credible resources is provided at the end of this presentation**

# What do Parents Need when Supporting their Youth?

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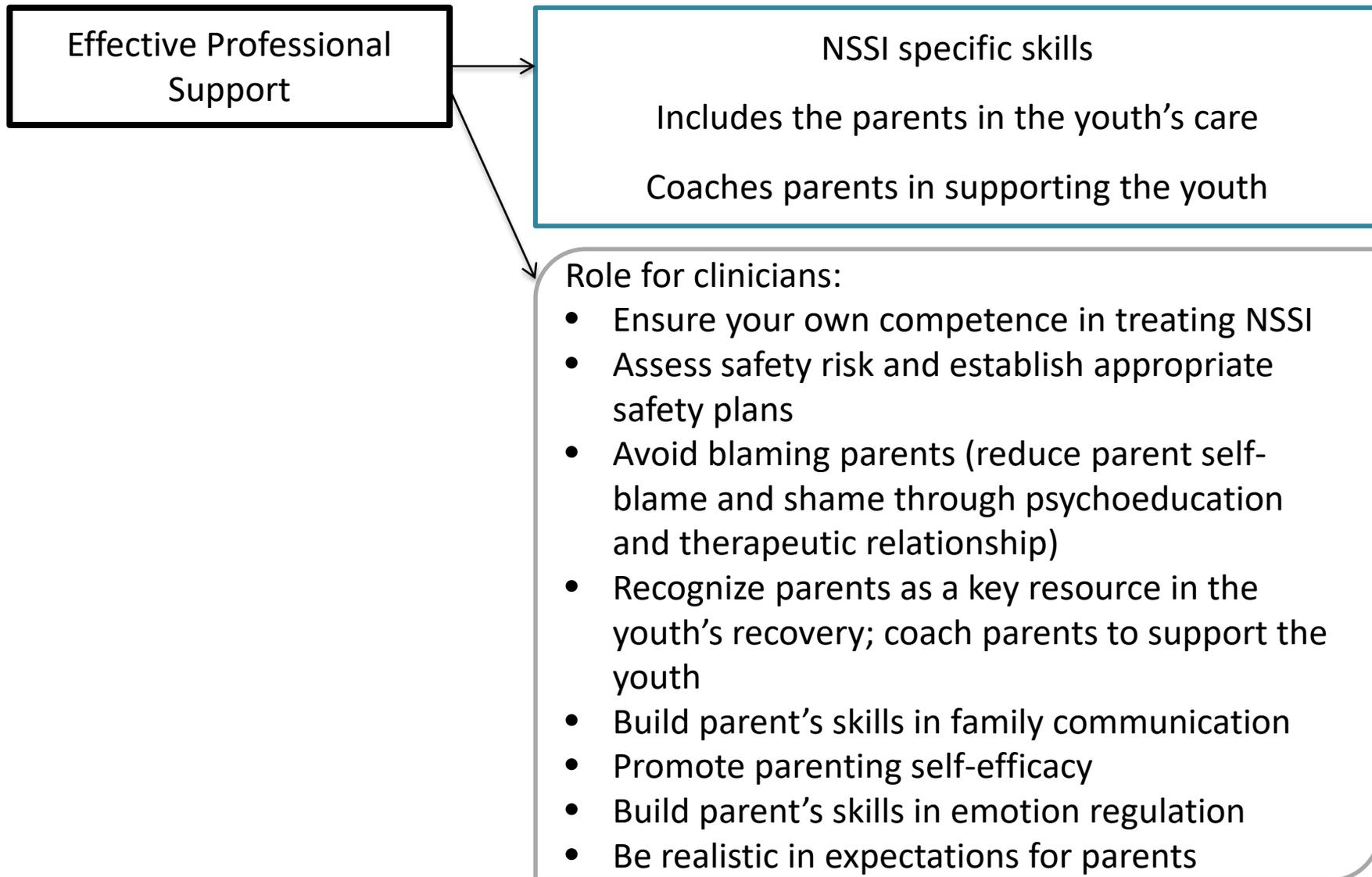
Accurate Information

Effective Professional Support

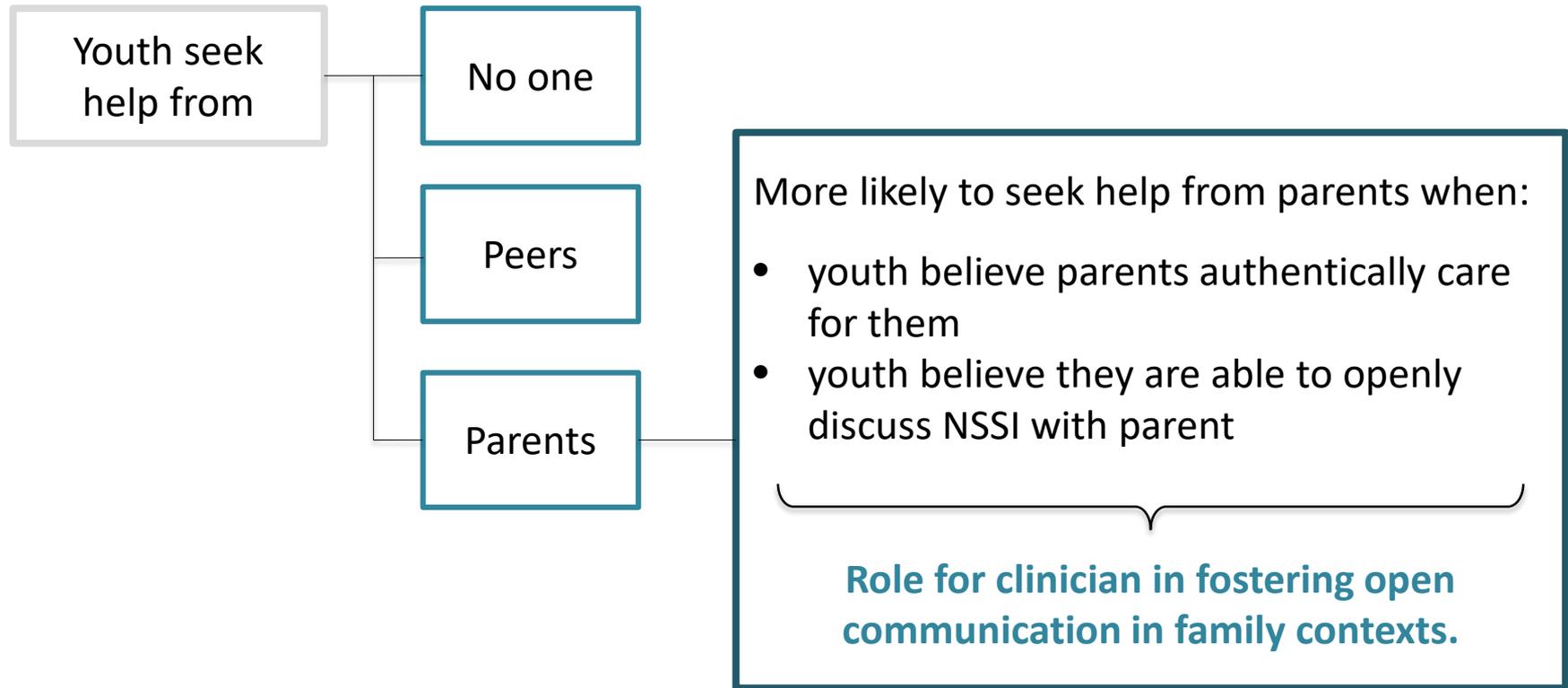
Peer Support

Self-Care

# Supporting Parents: Professional Support



# Supporting Parents: Parent-Youth Communication



# Supporting Parents: Parent-Youth Communication

When having difficult conversations...  
(e.g., discussing NSSI)

Coach parents to...



- Recognize their own reactions and emotions
- Have difficult conversations when there is ample time and privacy
- Use a supportive, calm, and validating tone that acknowledges the concerns and challenges of the youth
- Use active listening and pay attention to the youth's emotional needs
- Use respectful curiosity and open-ended questions to understand NSSI from the youth's perspective
- Avoid jumping in with solutions
- Avoid lecturing, ultimatums, punishments, or accusations
- Be patient. Some youth will not be ready to discuss the NSSI. Convey understanding of the youth's difficulty and leave the door open for future conversation.
- Encourage ongoing conversations

# Supporting Parents: Parent-Youth Communication

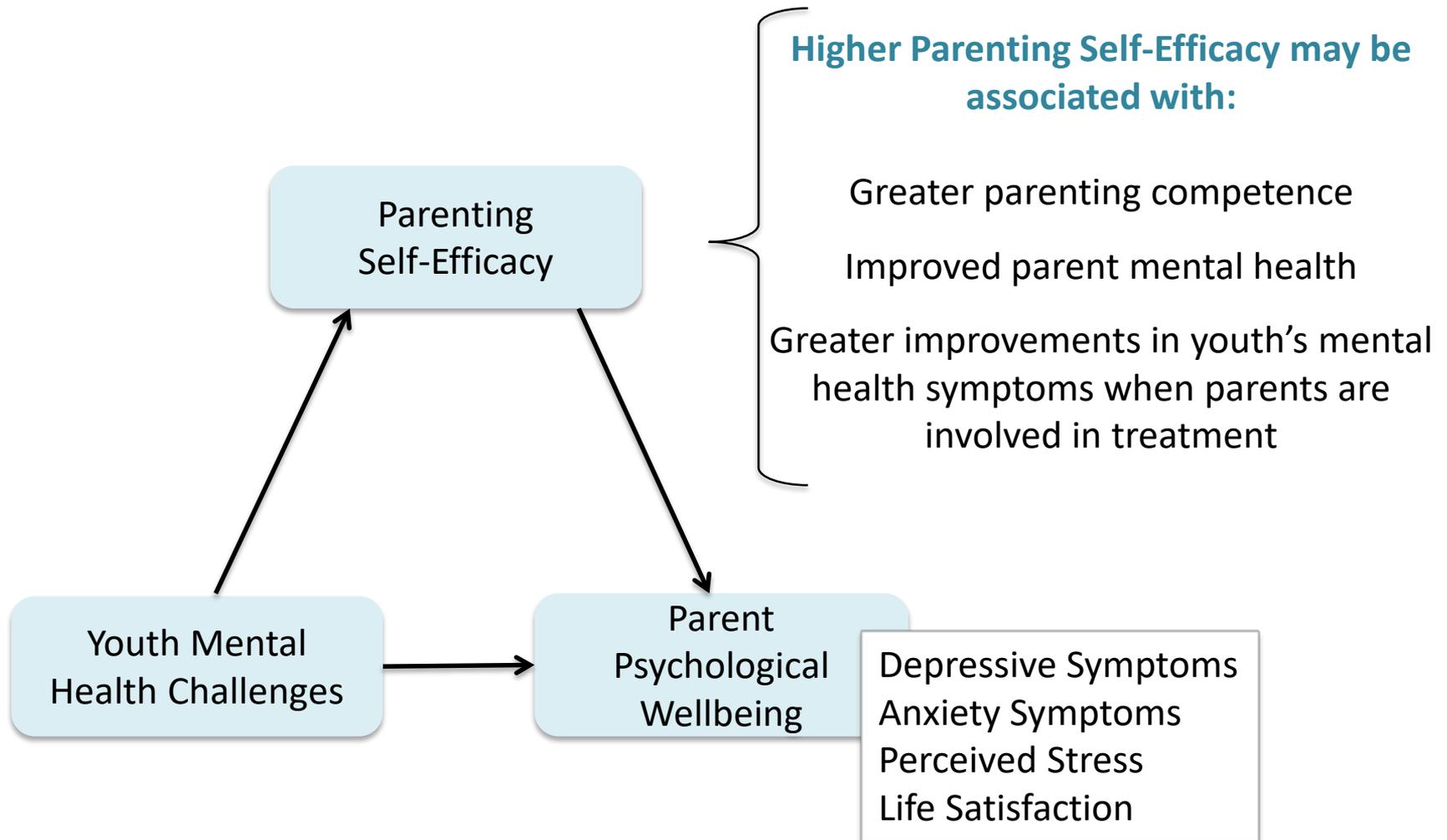
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Example wording for parents to use when discussing NSSI with their youth:

*I recognize this is likely hard for you to talk about with me. But, I want you to know that I'm concerned about you. I am here to support you and listen to you so I can try to understand what is going on for you. From what I've heard and read, teens may self-harm for different reasons. Could you try to help me understand what self-harm means for you and why you do it?*

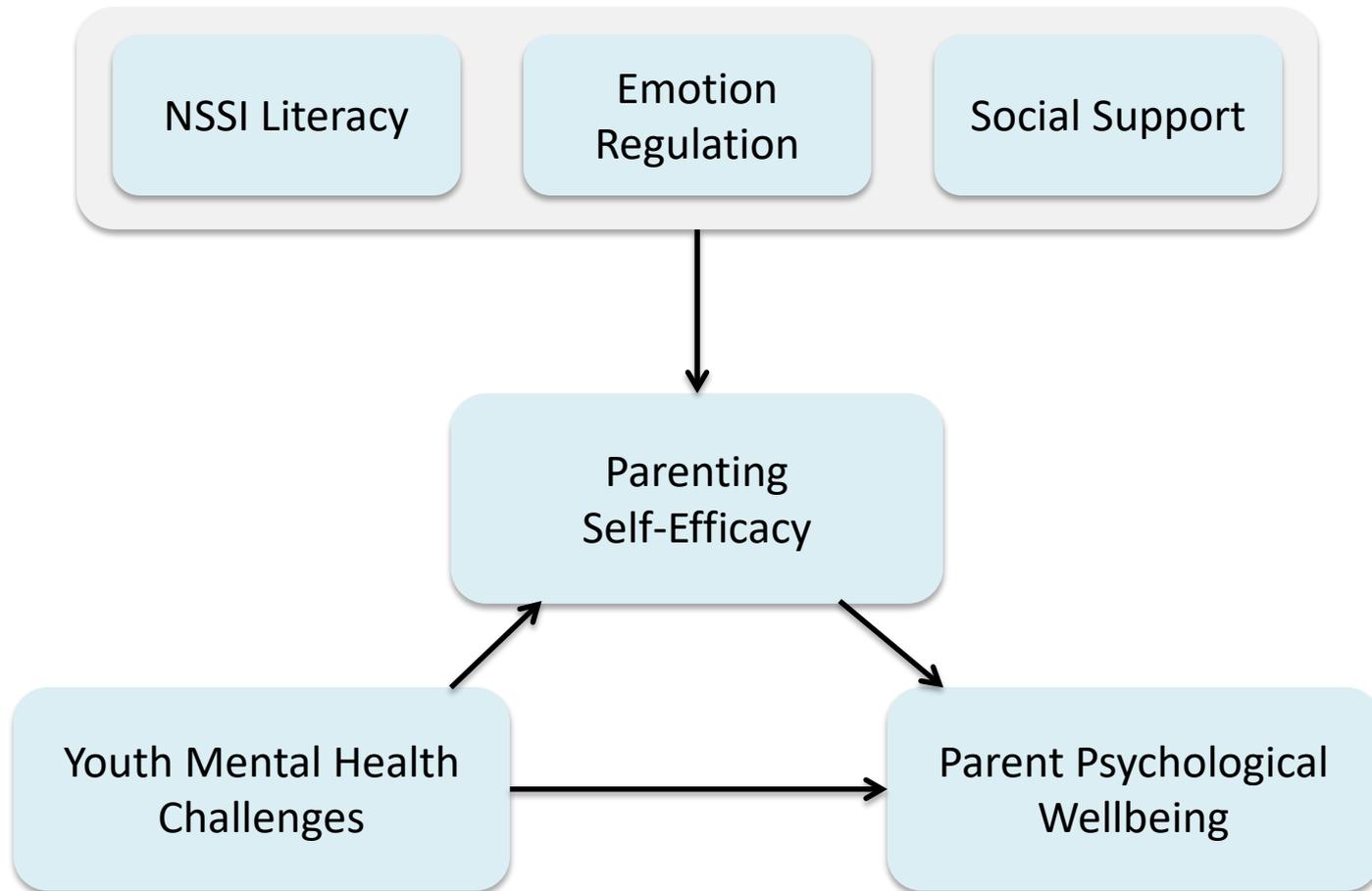
**Talking about self-injury can be quite difficult;  
this conversation should be open and ongoing**

# Supporting Parents: Parenting Self-Efficacy

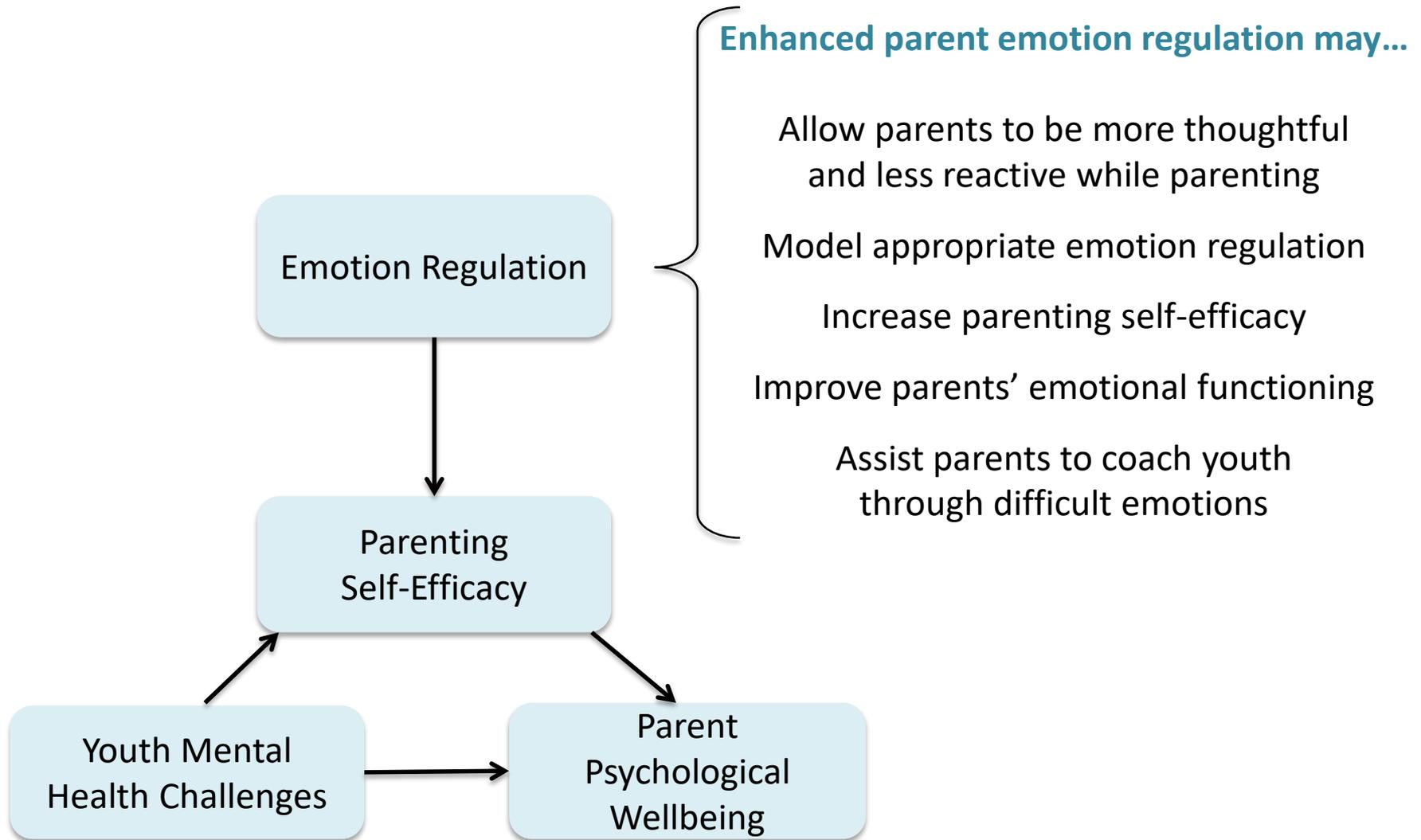


# Supporting Parents: Parenting Self-Efficacy

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# Supporting Parents: Parent Emotion Regulation



# What do Parents Need when Supporting their Youth?

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Accurate Information

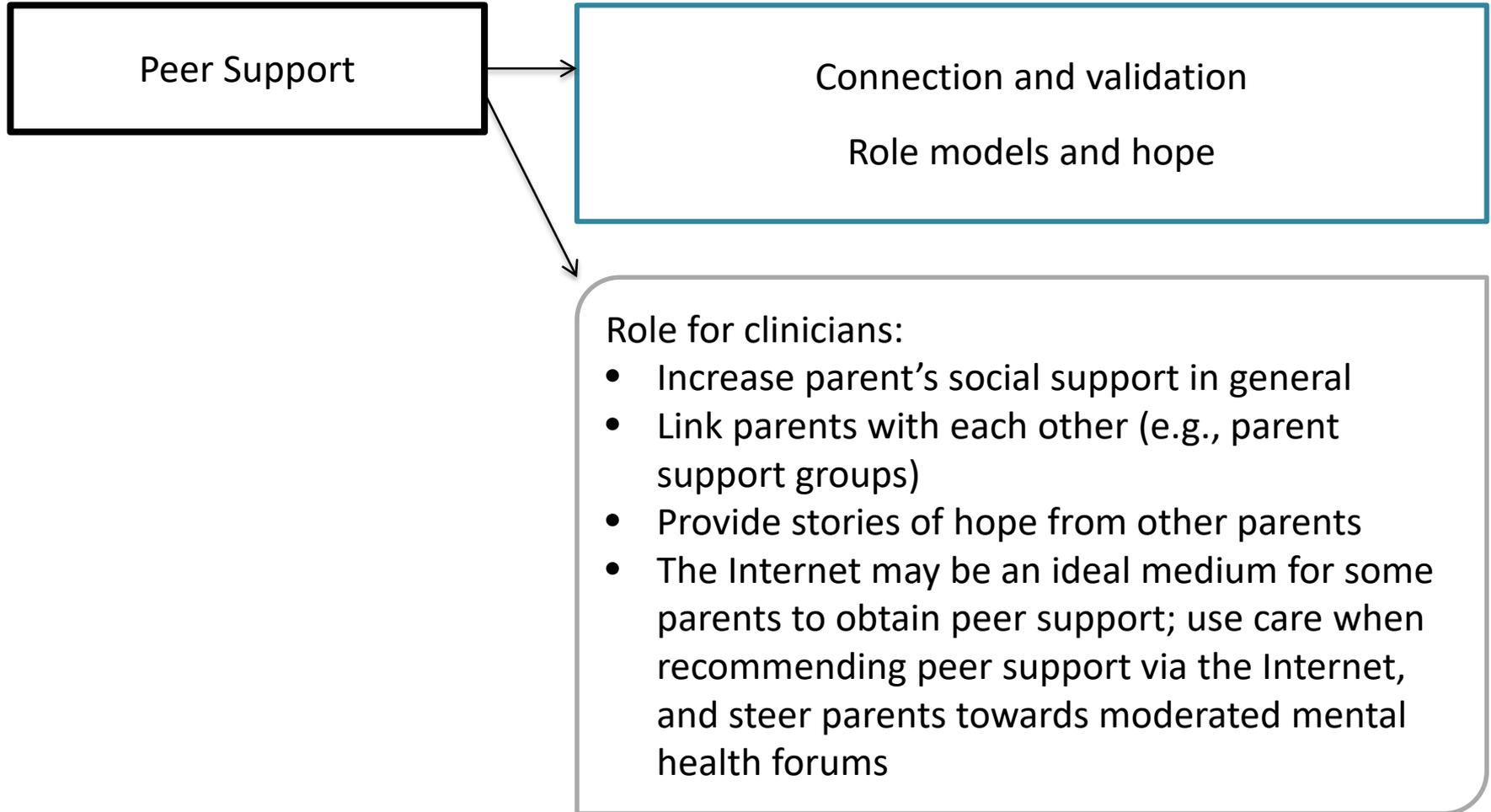
Effective Professional Support

Peer Support

Self-Care

# Supporting Parents: Peer Support

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# Supporting Parents: Peer Support

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*“Something that has helped me with parenting in general, and particularly since my oldest became a teen, has been discussing the challenges I’m facing with other parents, particularly those whose kids are a bit older and have been through similar challenges in the last 5-10 years. To me, having that support, having the knowledge that others have been through it, and knowing their kids have come through those difficult times, has been invaluable.”*

-Study Participant

# What do Parents Need when Supporting their Youth?

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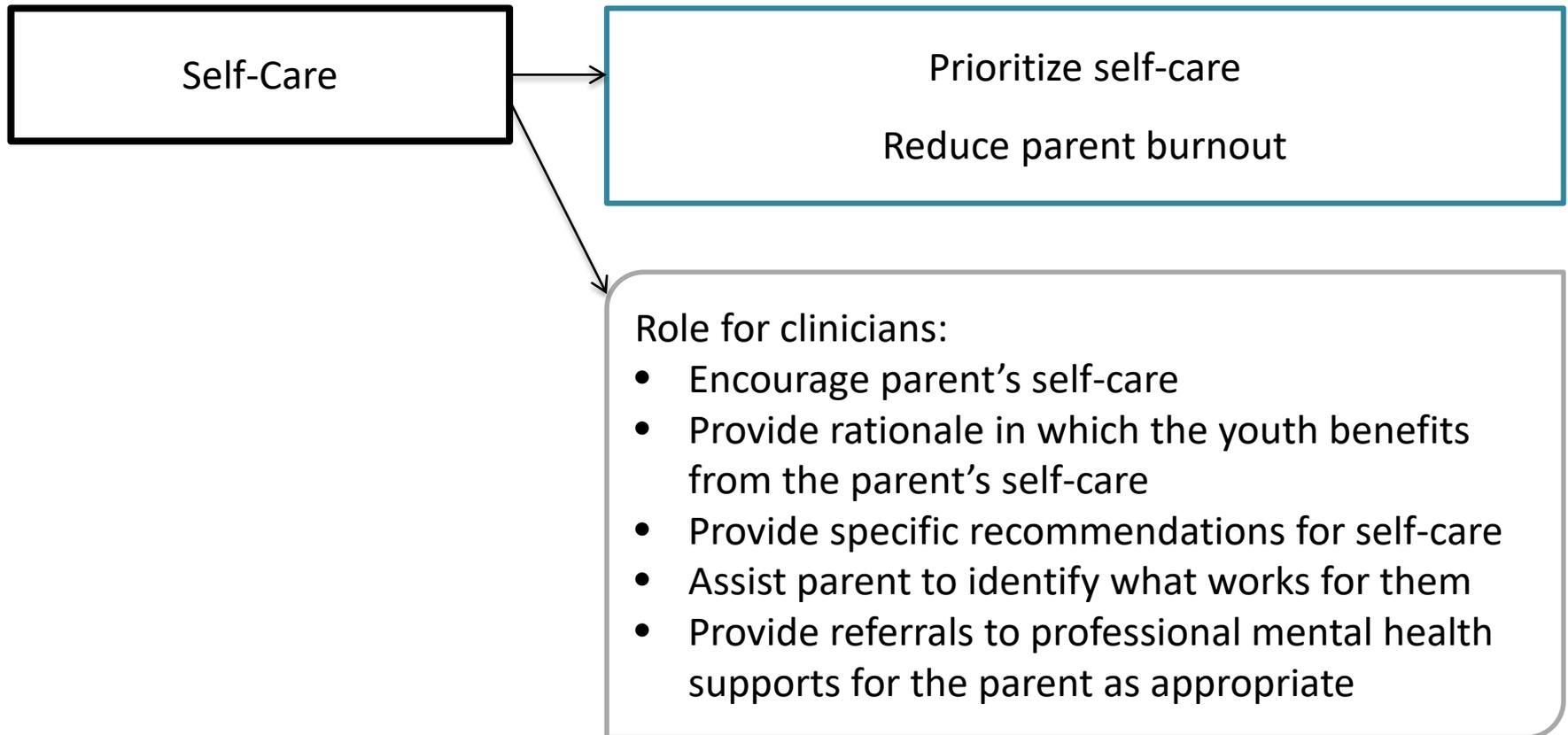
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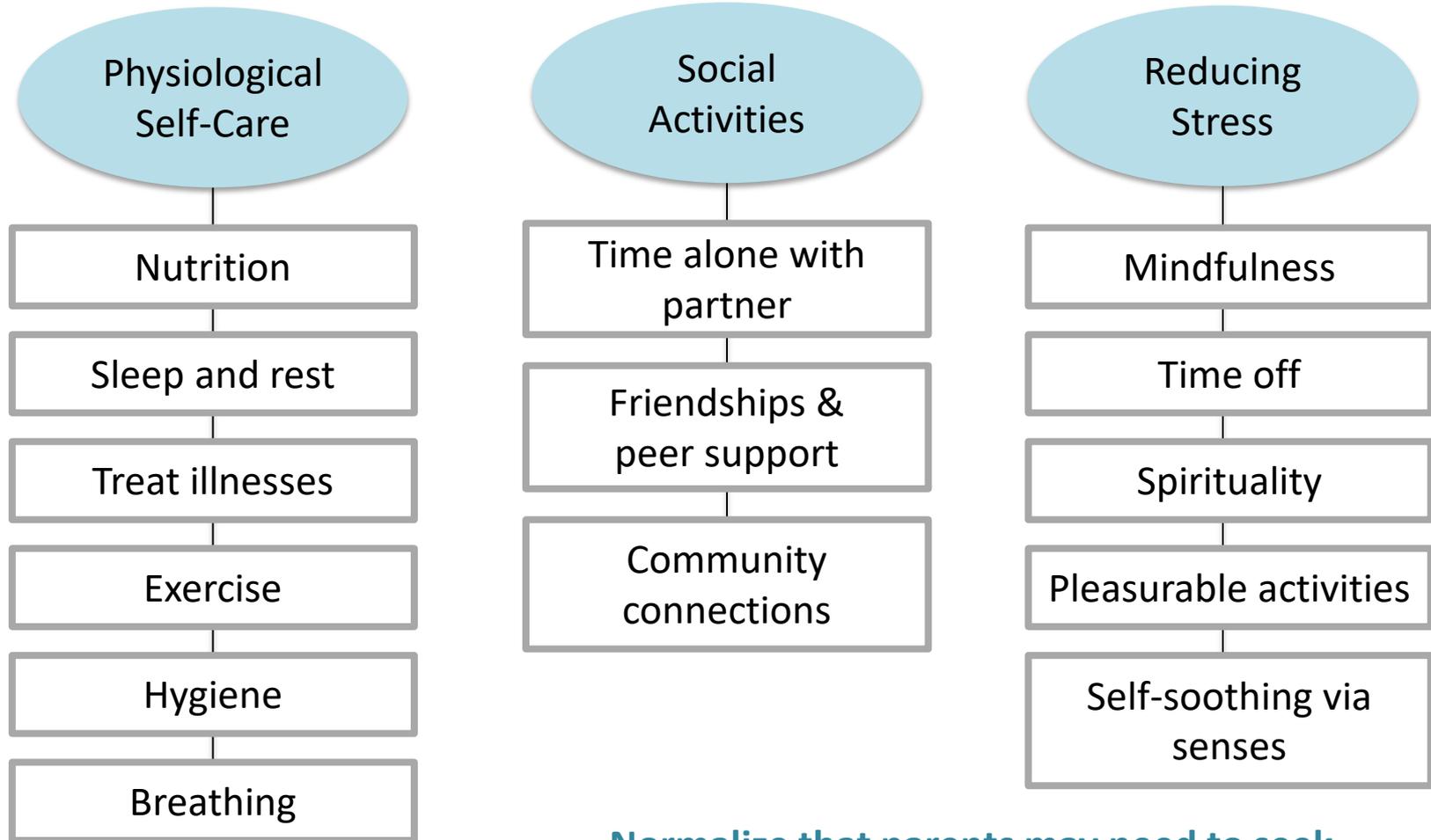
# Supporting Parents: Encouraging Self-Care



**Parents may be particularly reluctant to engage in self-care during times of crisis; yet, times of crisis may be when they need it the most**

# Supporting Parents: Encouraging Self-Care

Potential recommendations...



**Normalize that parents may need to seek professional support for themselves**

# NSSI in Youth: Case Study

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Your client is a young person who has a low mood and self-injures. Their parents are concerned, but supportive, and report that their youth never talks to them anymore. The youth reports that their parents are currently unaware of the self-injury and the youth does not want to worry them by telling them about it. The youth reports wanting to “just feel better”.

Role play: Discuss with the youth how to include their parents in their treatment

Role play: Disclose the self-injury to the parent

How might you capitalize on these parents as a resource for the youth?

# Dilemmas

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Common  
Dilemmas

Who is your client? (Privacy/confidentiality and dual relationships)

Youth refuses treatment, but parents want you to help

Youth refuses to have parents involved

Parent cannot or should not to be involved

Dilemmas concerning safety

# Implications for Clinical Practice

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**Out of what we have discussed,  
what is going to be the most relevant for you?**

# Resources for Parents and Youth

## Websites

- Self-Injury Outreach and Support: <http://sioutreach.org>
- Self-Injury and Recovery Research and Resources:  
<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu>
- Kids in the House (A video series with Dr. Wendy Lader):  
<https://www.kidsinthehouse.com/expert/parenting-advice-from-wendy-lader-phd>
- Health Talk Online – Self-harm: A Parent’s Experience:  
<http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health/self-harm-parents-experiences/overview>

## Books

- Gratz, K. L., & Chapman, A. L. (2009). *Freedom from Self-Harm: Overcoming self-injury with skills from DBT and other treatments*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Hollander, M. (2008). *Helping teens who cut: Understanding and ending self-injury*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Smith, J. (2012). *The Parent’s Guide to Self-Harm: What Parents Need to Know*. Oxford, England: Lion Hudson.

# Resources for Mental Health Professionals

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## Websites

- Self-Injury Outreach and Support: <http://sioutreach.org>
- Self-Injury and Recovery Research and Resources:  
<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu>

## Empirical Articles for Mental Health Professionals

- Cloutier, P., Martin, J., Kennedy, A., Nixon, M. K., & Muehlenkamp, J. J. (2010). Characteristics and co-occurrence of adolescent non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal behaviours in pediatric emergency crisis services. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, 259-269.
- Klonsky, E. D., & Muehlenkamp, J. J. (2007). Self-injury: A research review for the practitioner. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 63, 1045-1056.
- Washburn, J. J., Richards, S. L., Styer, D. M., Gebhardt, M., Juzwin, K. R., Yourek, A., & Aldridge, D. (2012). Psychotherapeutic approaches to non-suicidal self-injury in adolescents. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 6(1), 1-8.

# Resources for Mental Health Professionals

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## Empirical Articles for Schools

- Heath, N. L., & Lewis, S. P. (Eds.). (2013). Nonsuicidal self-injury [Special Issue]. *School Psychology Forum*, 7(4).

## Books for Mental Health Professionals

- Klonsky, E. D., Muehlenkamp, J. J., Lewis, S. P., & Walsh, B. (2011). *Non-suicidal self-injury*. Hogrefe & Huber: Cambridge, MA.
- Nixon, M. K., & Heath, N. L. (2009). *Self-Injury in youth: The essential guide to assessment and intervention*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group
- Nock, M. K. (2009). *Understanding nonsuicidal self-injury: Origins, assessment and intervention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Walsh, B. W. (2012). *Treating self-injury: A practical guide*. Guilford Press.

# Thank you

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Stephen Lewis: [stephen.lewis@uoguelph.ca](mailto:stephen.lewis@uoguelph.ca)

**SiOS Website:** [www.sioutreach.org](http://www.sioutreach.org)

**Social Media:** Twitter: [www.twitter.com/sioutreach](http://www.twitter.com/sioutreach)  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/sioutreach](http://www.facebook.com/sioutreach)  
YouTube: [www.youtube.com/sioutreach](http://www.youtube.com/sioutreach)