



## Self Harm: Getting Help

It's important to acknowledge that self-harm helps you—otherwise you wouldn't do it. Some of the ways cutting and self-harming can help include:

- Expressing feelings you can't put into words
- Releasing the pain and tension you feel inside
- Helping you feel in control
- Distracting you from overwhelming emotions or difficult life circumstances
- Relieving guilt and punishing yourself
- Making you feel alive, or simply feel something, instead of feeling numb

Once you better understand why you self-harm, you can learn ways to stop self-harming, and find resources that can support you through this struggle.

### If self-harm helps, why stop?

- Although self-harm and cutting can give you temporary relief, it comes at a cost. In the long term, it causes far more problems than it solves.
- The relief is short lived, and is quickly followed by other feelings like shame and guilt. Meanwhile, it keeps you from learning more effective strategies for feeling better.
- Keeping the secret from friends and family members is difficult and lonely.
- You can hurt yourself badly, even if you don't mean to. It's easy to misjudge the depth of a cut or end up with an infected wound.
- If you don't learn other ways to deal with emotional pain, it puts you at risk for bigger problems down the line, including major depression, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide.
- Self-harm can become addictive. It may start off as an impulse or something you do to feel more in control, but soon it feels like the cutting or self-harming is controlling you. It often turns into a compulsive behavior that seems impossible to stop.

**The bottom line: self-harm and cutting don't help you with the issues that made you want to hurt yourself in the first place.**

### Help for cutting and self-harm step 1: Confide in someone

- Need help for self-harm? If you're not sure where to turn, call the S.A.F.E. Alternatives information line in the U.S. at (800) 366-8288 for referrals and support for cutting and self-harm.
- In the middle of a crisis? If you're feeling suicidal and need help right now, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline in the U.S. at (800) 273-8255. For a suicide helpline outside the U.S., visit Befrienders Worldwide.
- If you're ready to get help for cutting or self-harm, the first step is to confide in another person. It can be scary to talk about the very thing you have worked so hard to hide, but it can also be a huge relief to finally let go of your secret and share what you're going through.
- Deciding whom you can trust with such personal information can be difficult. Choose someone who isn't going to gossip or try to take control of your recovery. Ask yourself who in your life makes you feel accepted and



supported. It could be a friend, teacher, religious leader, counselor, or relative. But you don't necessarily have to choose someone you are close to.

- Eventually, you'll want to open up to your inner circle of friends and family members, but sometimes it's easier to start by talking to an adult who you respect—such as a teacher, religious leader, or counselor - who has a little more distance from the situation and won't find it as difficult to be objective.

### Tips for talking about cutting and self-harm

- Focus on your feelings. Instead of sharing sensational details of your self-harm behavior—what specifically you do to hurt yourself—focus on the feelings or situations that lead to it. This can help the person you're confiding in better understand where you're coming from. It also helps to let the person know why you're telling them. Do you want help or advice from them? Do you simply want another person to know so you can let go of the secret?
- Communicate in whatever way you feel most comfortable. If you're too nervous to talk in person, consider starting off the conversation with an email or letter (although it's important to eventually follow-up with a face-to-face conversation). Don't feel pressured into sharing things you're not ready to talk about. You don't have to show the person your injuries or answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering.
- Give the person time to process what you tell them. As difficult as it is for you to open up, it may also be difficult for the person you tell—especially if it's a close friend or family member. Sometimes, you may not like the way the person reacts. Try to remember that reactions such as shock, anger, and fear come out of concern for you. It may help to print out this article for the people you choose to tell. The better they understand self-harm, the better able they'll be to support you.
- Talking about self-harm can be very stressful and bring up a lot of emotions. Don't be discouraged if the situation feels worse for a short time right after sharing your secret. It's uncomfortable to confront and change long-standing habits. But once you get past these initial challenges, you'll start to feel better.

### Help for cutting and self-harm step 2: Figure out why you cut

#### Learn to manage overwhelming stress and emotions

Understanding why you cut or self-harm is a vital first step toward your recovery. If you can figure out what function your self-injury serves, you can learn other ways to get those needs met—which in turn can reduce your desire to hurt yourself.

#### Identify your self-harm triggers

- Remember, self-harm is most often a way of dealing with emotional pain. What feelings make you want to cut or hurt yourself? Sadness? Anger? Shame? Loneliness? Guilt? Emptiness?
- Once you learn to recognize the feelings that trigger your need to self-injure, you can start developing healthier alternatives.

#### Get in touch with your feelings

- If you're having a hard time pinpointing the feelings that trigger your urge to cut, you may need to work on your emotional awareness. Emotional awareness means knowing what you are feeling and why. It's the ability to identify and express what you are feeling from moment to moment and to understand the connection between your feelings and your actions.



- The idea of paying attention to your feelings—rather than numbing them or releasing them through self-harm—may sound frightening to you. You may be afraid that you'll get overwhelmed or be stuck with the pain. But the truth is that emotions quickly come and go if you let them. If you don't try to fight, judge, or beat yourself up over the feeling, you'll find that it soon fades, replaced by another emotion. It's only when you obsess over the feeling that it persists.

### **Help for cutting and self-harm step 3: Find new coping techniques**

Self-harm is your way of dealing with feelings and difficult situations. So if you're going to stop, you need to have alternative ways of coping in place so you can respond differently when you start to feel like cutting or hurting yourself.

#### **If you cut to express pain and intense emotions**

- Paint, draw, or scribble on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint
- Express your feelings in a journal
- Compose a poem or song to say what you feel
- Write down any negative feelings and then rip the paper up
- Listen to music that expresses what you're feeling

#### **If you cut to calm and soothe yourself**

- Take a bath or hot shower
- Pet or cuddle with a dog or cat
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Massage your neck, hands, and feet
- Listen to calming music

#### **If you cut because you feel disconnected and numb**

- Call a friend (you don't have to talk about self-harm)
- Take a cold shower
- Hold an ice cube in the crook of your arm or leg
- Chew something with a very strong taste, like chili peppers, peppermint, or a grapefruit peel.
- Go online to a self-help website, chat room, or message board

#### **If you cut to release tension or vent anger**

- Exercise vigorously—run, dance, jump rope, or hit a punching bag
- Punch a cushion or mattress or scream into your pillow
- Squeeze a stress ball or squish Play-Doh or clay
- Rip something up (sheets of paper, a magazine)
- Make some noise (play an instrument, bang on pots and pans)



### Substitutes for the cutting sensation

- Use a red felt tip pen to mark where you might usually cut
- Rub ice across your skin where you might usually cut
- Put rubber bands on wrists, arms, or legs and snap them instead of cutting or hitting

### Professional treatment for cutting and self-harm

- You may also need the help and support of a trained professional as you work to overcome the self-harm habit, so consider talking to a therapist. A therapist can help you develop new coping techniques and strategies to stop self-harming, while also helping you get to the root of why you cut or hurt yourself.
- Remember, self-harm doesn't occur in a vacuum. It's an outward expression of inner pain—pain that often has its roots in early life. There is often a connection between self-harm and childhood trauma.
- Self-harm may be your way of coping with feelings related to past abuse, flashbacks, negative feelings about your body, or other traumatic memories. This may be the case even if you're not consciously aware of the connection.

### Finding the right therapist

- Finding the right therapist may take some time. It's very important that the therapist you choose has experience treating both trauma and self-injury. But the quality of the relationship with your therapist is equally important. Trust your instincts. If you don't feel safe, respected, or understood, find another therapist.
- There should be a sense of trust and warmth between you and your therapist. This therapist should be someone who accepts self-harm without condoning it, and who is willing to help you work toward stopping it at your own pace. You should feel at ease with him or her, even while talking through your most personal issues.

### Resources:

- Youth Suicide Prevention Program Resources: [www.yspp.org/resources/GLBTRResources.htm](http://www.yspp.org/resources/GLBTRResources.htm)
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) | TTY: 1-800-799-4889 | [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org)
- 1-866-TEENLINK | 866-833-6546 | [www.866teenlink.org](http://www.866teenlink.org)
- Washington Recovery Help Line (24 hours): Support and resources for youth struggling with substance abuse, problem gambling, and/or mental health. Confidential and anonymous. Toll Free 1-866-789-1511 | [www.warecoveryhelpline.org](http://www.warecoveryhelpline.org)
- Greater Seattle Alateen & Alanon: Support groups for youth struggling with addiction. Meetings available in King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap Counties. Visit their website for more information and a list of meetings in your area. Call 24-Hour Hotline (206) 625-0000 | [www.seattle-al-anon.org](http://www.seattle-al-anon.org)
- LGBTQAI+ Youth: Call 24-Hour Hotline 1-866-488-7386 | [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
- 1-855-DRUGFREE | [www.drugfree.com](http://www.drugfree.com)