



Youth Suicide Prevention: Understanding Self Harm

1. What is self-harm?

- Non-fatal intentional behavior that results in actual tissue damage, illness or risk of death. Cutting, scratching or pinching, impact with objects, and burning are amongst the most common.
- Self-harm is a way of expressing and dealing with deep distress and emotional pain. As counterintuitive as it may sound to those on the outside, hurting yourself makes you feel better. In fact, you may feel like you have no choice. Injuring yourself is the only way you know how to cope with feelings like sadness, self-loathing, emptiness, guilt, and rage.
- The problem is that the relief that comes from self-harming doesn't last very long. It's like slapping on a Band-Aid when what you really need are stitches. It may temporarily stop the bleeding, but it doesn't fix the underlying injury. And it also creates its own problems.

2. Who self-harms?

- Self-harm is correlated with the following behaviors and symptoms but is NOT caused by these: depression, loneliness/isolation, hopelessness, perfectionism, impulsivity, impaired family communication, anxiety, self-blaming, low self-esteem, hypercritical parents, awareness of self-harm by peers

3. Why do teens self-harm?

- Reasons vary, but tend to fall into one of these categories:
 - to stop bad feelings
 - to feel something
 - to avoid doing something unpleasant
 - to get a reaction

4. Is a teen who self-harms also suicidal?

- Typically teens who self-harm are trying to feel better; using the behavior as a coping mechanism, while a teen who attempts suicide is trying to end all feelings, BUT... the intent of the behavior can vary and needs to be assessed. Self-harm can be a risk factor for suicide; the higher the frequency of self-harm, the greater the risk for suicide.

5. What can be done about a teen who is self-harming?

- Perhaps you've noticed suspicious injuries on someone close to you, or that person has confided to you that he or she is cutting. Whatever the case may be, you may be feeling unsure of yourself. What should you say? How can you help?
- Deal with your own feelings. You may feel shocked, confused, or even disgusted by self-harming behaviors—and guilty about admitting these feelings. Acknowledging your feelings is an important first step toward helping your loved one.
- Learn about the problem. The best way to overcome any discomfort or distaste you feel about self-harm is by learning about it. Understanding why your friend or family member is self-injuring can help you see the world from his or her eyes.



- Don't judge. Avoid judgmental comments and criticism—they'll only make things worse. The first two tips will go a long way in helping you with this. Remember, the self-harming person already feels ashamed and alone.
- Offer support, not ultimatums. It's only natural to want to help, but threats, punishments, and ultimatums are counterproductive. Express your concern and let the person know that you're available whenever he or she wants to talk or needs support.
- Encourage communication. Encourage your loved one to express whatever he or she is feeling, even if it's something you might be uncomfortable with. If the person hasn't told you about the self-harm, bring up the subject in a caring, non-confrontational way: "I've noticed injuries on your body, and I want to understand what you're going through."
- If the self-harmer is a family member, especially if it is your child, prepare yourself to address difficulties in the family. This is not about blame, but rather about learning ways of dealing with problems and communicating better that can help the whole family.
- Don't react with criticism or horror
- Remain non-judgmental; let the teen know that you care
- Understand that the behavior is a coping mechanism
- Validate the emotion that triggered the behavior, not the behavior
- Get professional help that will provide the teen greater insight into their emotional states and replace the self-harming behavior with effective coping skills (see below, questions for interviewing and selecting a therapist)

6. Warning Signs for Self Harm

Because clothing can hide physical injuries, and inner turmoil can be covered up by a seemingly calm disposition, self-injury can be hard to detect. However, there are red flags you can look for (but remember—you don't have to be sure that you know what's going on in order to reach out to someone you're worried about):

- Unexplained wounds or scars from cuts, bruises, or burns, usually on the wrists, arms, thighs, or chest.
- Blood stains on clothing, towels, or bedding; blood-soaked tissues.
- Sharp objects or cutting instruments, such as razors, knives, needles, glass shards, or bottle caps, in the person's belongings.
- Frequent "accidents." Someone who self-harms may claim to be clumsy or have many mishaps, in order to explain away injuries.
- Covering up. A person who self-injures may insist on wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather.
- Needing to be alone for long periods of time, especially in the bedroom or bathroom.
- Isolation and irritability.

6. What should I do if I know a friend is self harming?

- Peers are often the first to know that something is not right, and want to support their friends as much as possible, often by keeping it a secret. However, secrecy is very unhealthy and many teens do not have the skills needed to help someone who is self-harming.
- If you know someone is self-harming, speak to your parent and ask for advice. If you are not comfortable talking to a parent, then speak to the school counselor or a teacher. Your friend may be mad that you spoke out, but it is better to have an angry friend who is getting help, than a peer who is spiraling into depression.



Resources:

- Youth Suicide Prevention Program Resources: www.yspp.org/resources/GLBTQResources.htm
- Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) | TTY: 1-800-799-4889 | www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org
- 1-866-TEENLINK | 866-833-6546 | 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
- 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
- LGBTQAI+ Youth: Call 24-Hour Hotline 1-866-488-7386 | www.thetrevorproject.org
- 1-855-DRUGFREE | www.drugfree.com