

Self-Harming Behaviors: How You Can Help Your Child

Perhaps one of our greatest instincts as parents is to protect our children from harm. That's why it can be especially upsetting when you discover a child is self-harming. What could cause a child to intentionally hurt themselves? More importantly, is there anything you can do to prevent it from happening?

Self-harming is defined as deliberately injuring oneself without suicidal intent. Most commonly, it involves self-cutting, but can also include behaviors such as burning, scratching, and hitting oneself to the point of injury. So, why would anyone hurt themselves on purpose?

There are a variety of reasons why a youth might self-harm. Self-harming is often a way of relieving interpersonal problems, unpleasant thoughts, and overwhelmingly painful emotions. Youth who self-harm often have a negative self-image. For some, it can induce a positive emotional state similar to cocaine and other drugs that release endorphins to create good feelings. For others, self-harming can be a pain killer. With the injury, the internal pain shifts to external pain, which is often more bearable. Like opioids and other "pain killers," self-harming often becomes addictive, as well.



Teachers, social workers, and mental health professionals report a significant increase recently in child/youth anxiety, depression, and hopelessness--and a lack of resources--which has resulted in an increase in self-harming behaviors among youth.

Although there is extensive research on self-harm and suicide, very little of it focuses specifically on youth in care and youth who were adopted. What we do know is that self-harming behaviors are most commonly seen among preteens and teenagers who have

experienced trauma. It logically follows that our children may be at higher risk for self-harming. And while most adolescents struggle with identity issues, adoption adds layers of complexity to this already difficult stage of development. Adolescence can be a particularly

painful period for the child who was adopted, and they may turn to self-harm as a way of coping with (or avoiding) the feelings that arise.

While some psychologists report there's been an increase in self-harming behaviors as kids have become more aware of it through movies and other media (some may try it as a "novelty"), it is the youth who are carrying deep emotional pain who are at risk for becoming addicted to the relief or rush it can

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provide.

There was a time when these behaviors were considered “merely a cry for help,” but that doesn’t hold when you factor in the lengths many adolescents go to to hide it. Cutting or burning is often done in places on the body where the injuries cannot be seen. Cutting on the inner thigh is common among girls. With boys, it can look more like punching a wall intending to cause injury. As a result, the underlying emotional issues may be seen as anger rather than hurt.

The addictive element of self-harming can make it particularly difficult for both parents and youth themselves to identify triggers. True enough, events such as a breakup or bullying can undoubtedly add to the deep emotional pain that a young person seeks to relieve. Still, addictive behaviors don’t necessarily require an obvious trigger. The child’s overall emotional state may be your best indicator that they are at risk of self-harm. So, what should parents look for if they suspect a child may be self-harming?

Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Early intervention can help prevent the behavior from becoming a habit. As the child’s parent, you’re the first line of defense. Here are a few things to look for:

- Small linear cuts, sometimes spelling words
- Frequent unexplained cuts or scratches
- Long sleeves in hot weather
- Missing razor blades or finding razor blades in child’s room
- Youth is withdrawn or avoids interacting with you
- Changes in mood, communication, school performance
- Anxiety or depression
- Eating disorders

What Parents Can Do

One of your best defenses is having an open

and honest relationship with the child so they have healthy ways of expressing and coping with pain. Of course, this is easier said than done, especially with preteens, teens, and kids who have suffered trauma. But there are some steps you might take that can help.

- Try not to overreact. Doing so may cause guilt and shame that could make the situation worse.
- Seek the professional help of a therapist or psychologist. A trained professional, particularly one who specializes in self-harm, can help identify and address the underlying issues.
- Acknowledge the pain and provide emotional support. Talk about it in a supportive and understanding way so the child will feel safe sharing with you. “I see you’re really hurting. I’m here to help. Let’s work through this together.” Focusing on the emotional pain the child is experiencing helps them feel understood and less isolated.
- Model healthy coping behaviors and offer alternatives for releasing pain and anxiety (e.g., physical activity that will help release endorphins). Crank up the radio and dance to exhaustion. Scream into a pillow until you can’t scream anymore. Run as fast as you can for as long as you can. Punch the daylight out of a pillow or couch cushion.
- Ask your child what kinds of things make them happy. Are there activities or hobbies the child is passionate about that you can encourage as an outlet or a way of creating pleasurable feelings (e.g., dance classes, soccer, theater club, drawing)? Show an interest in their interests to strengthen your connection.
- Find ways to help eliminate stressors. Ask, “Is there anything stressing you out right now that I can help with?” Does the child have so many extracurricular activities that they are overwhelmed and not enjoying them? Are you monitoring

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- their use of social media?
- Validate, validate, validate the child's feelings. Actively listen and offer reassurance.

Helping children and youth seek out healthy alternatives to releasing pain, as well as a safe place to express their feelings, will go a long way on the road to healing.



Resources

Additional Resources

- [For Professionals Working With Young People: Mental Health Resources and Advice](#)
- [Self Help Hotlines & Crisis Lines in WI](#)
- [Silent Suffering: Responding to Self-Harm](#)
- [Self-harm](#)
- [What Is Self-Harm?](#)
- [When Children and Teens Self-Harm](#)
- [For Workers in the Community and Youth Workers: Supporting a Young Person Struggling With Self-Harm](#)