

Adolescent self-harm

Self-injury or self-harm is when a person deliberately hurts themselves to deal with emotional pain. Mostly, people self-harm by cutting themselves, but it can also include scratching, bruising or burning.

When your child self-harms

It is shocking to discover that your child is harming themselves. It often happens after a period of worry about your teenager that you can't quite formulate. Most self-harming teenagers are seeking quick relief from emotional distress. Many have poor emotional coping styles, for example, getting angry, blaming and isolating themselves and engaging in substance abuse.

Some of the most common reasons teenagers give for self-harm include (Selekman, 2006) a desire to have control, to alleviate emotional pain and distress, to feel alive or to feel numb. Other common reasons given are to feel connected to friends, to stop bad thoughts, self-punishment or to hurt others.

Research has shown that many adolescents who self-harm engage in other self-harming behaviours such as bulimia, substance abuse and risky sexual behaviour.

There is a strong link between eating disorders and self-harm, and in particular, body image issues and self-harming behaviours. Recent data from GPs identified that while rates of self-harming in boys has remained the same, there has been a massive 68% rise in self-harm in girls. One possible reason for this is thought to be stresses related to the exposure to digital media.

What should you do if your child or teenager is self-harming?

- Be available for support
- Listen
- Don't get angry when they self-harm

Be aware about social media and peer pressure. Friends can be a support system. In some cases, groups of friends may use self-harm as a coping mechanism.

Self-harm is often a secretive behaviour and exposure may cause feelings of guilt, shame and distress. Your child may not be able to talk immediately. Your first conversation on the subject is important, as it sets the tone for future trust. Many parents urgently want to know why and what they have done wrong. Sometimes the 'why' is complex and there may not be a ready answer.

Self-harm is non-suicidal behaviour and it does not mean that your child has a mental illness. However, if you are worried that your child is thinking about or planning suicide, you need to get urgent medical help.

What helps?

Developing a trusting relationship with a therapist who can work with the young person, involving their family (where possible) to develop emotional resilience and coping strategies.

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