

Understanding Self-Harm

You may know someone, or you may be someone, who uses self-harm as a way of coping with negative events or feelings. Whether it's you, or someone you care about, self-harm can be very scary. Teens and pre-teens are at the greatest risk for self-harm.

Most people who self-harm are not trying to kill themselves; they're trying to deal with emotions or current/past events that are upsetting. Regardless of the reason, cutting, scratching, burning, hitting oneself, pulling hair, pinching, piercing, or inserting objects under the skin are not effective coping methods and can be dangerous. Some teens who start self-harming report they become addicted to it – they cannot stop without help.

Talking about self-harm is difficult. There is often a sense of shame and secrecy about it. Most people who self-harm try to hide it. Some do not. Whether it's secret or out in the open, self-harm is a plea for help.

Why might someone begin to self-harm?

There are many reasons. Some of the most frequently stated reasons include:

- Dealing with overwhelming emotional pain
- A reaction to difficult situations
- A result of feeling unloved, powerless, or unworthy
- In response to trauma, either current or previous
- To gain a sense of control
- Peer pressure

Individuals may also suffer from depression or other mental health issues or have an alcohol or substance use disorder.

How can I help someone who self-harms?

It can be difficult to know what to say or do when you learn someone you care about self-harms. Be aware that about half of those who self-harm will seek help, not from a professional, but from their friends. So knowing how to react is important:

- Don't panic or overreact.
- Don't be judgmental.
- Let them know you care about them and are there for them.
- Relate to them as a whole person, not just their self-harm.
- Be empathetic.
- Let them control their decisions.
- Remind them of their positive qualities without pressuring them.
- Offer to help them find support.

If you are someone who self-harms

Self-harming is not a sign that you are crazy, but it often means you don't have good ways to cope with things that bother you. It can be helpful to think about why you started self-harming. Some questions to ask:

- What was going on in your life when you first began to injure yourself?
- How do you feel just before you want to injure yourself?
- When does the urge to self-harm arise – are you always in the same place or with the same people?
- Do you always experience the same emotions when you get the urge to self-harm?

Sometimes, it's helpful to keep a diary so you can better pinpoint when the urge to self-harm arises.

Some who self-injure report that delaying the urge even a few minutes can be enough to make it go away. Develop and practice some distracting behaviors, such as:

- Squeezing ice
- Cutting an empty plastic soda bottle, a piece of cardboard, an old shirt or sock
- Doing something that will give you a sharp sensation, such as eating a lemon
- Flatten aluminum cans for recycling
- Rip up an old newspaper, magazine
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root
- Take a cold bath or shower

There are many, many other distraction techniques. Investigate ones that might work for you and try them out.

Help is available

King's Daughters Outpatient Behavioral Medicine offers one-on-one services to help pre-teens, teens, and adults. For more information, please call (606) 408-3143.

Additional resources:

National Helpline: 1-800-DONT-CUT

Crisis Text LINE: Text HOME to 741741

Online Chat: [CrisisTextLine.org](https://www.crisistextline.org)

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