

Understanding Self-Harm

What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm, also referred to as self-injury, is the act of purposely hurting oneself. Self-harm is not a mental illness but a behavior in response to emotional distress. However, several illnesses can be associated with self-harm including anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder. Self-harm occurs most often during the teenage years and onset usually begins between 12 and 15 years of age. Research shows that more girls engage in self-harming behavior compared to boys. According to the 2016 Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor Survey, 12.2% of 8th graders, 14.3 % of 10th graders and 11.3% of 12th graders report inflicting self-harm in the past 12 months. Nationally, approximately 15% of teens report some form of self-injury.

The act of self-harm can come in many forms, but the most common methods include:

- Skin Cutting (70%-90%)
- Head Banging or Hitting (21%-44%)
- Burning (15%-35%)

It should be noted that most individuals who engage in non-suicidal self-injury hurt themselves in more than one way.

Why Do People Self-Harm?

Self-harm is most often an attempt to interrupt strong emotions and pressures that seem impossible to tolerate. While research indicates there is no single cause of self-harm, possible reasons why some people self-harm include:

- A way of coping with problems
- A way of expressing feelings that can't be put into words
- Distract from stressors of life
- Release emotional pain (emptiness, guilt, rage)

Those that self-harm often report that it is easier to feel the physical pain of self-injury than it is to deal with emotional pain that may be triggering the behavior. However, self-harm only provides a temporary relief. It is like slapping a Band-Aid on a gaping wound when stitches are needed. Thus, the underlying reasons that may trigger self-harm behaviors remain if they aren't addressed. Discovering what is fueling the urge of the behavior is a necessary step in recovery. Possible triggers may include:

- Difficulties at home
- Intense thoughts or memories
- Arguments or problems with friends
- Bullying
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Trauma
- Transitions and changes (i.e. divorce, loss of a loved one, changing schools)



Signs of Self-Harm

Signs of self-harm will vary depending upon the person but warning signs may include:

- Scarring from cuts and burn on parts of the body that can be hidden from clothing.
- Recurring new wounds such as scrapes, cuts or abrasions, lacerations or bruises.
- Keeping sharp objects nearby at all times.
- Injuries are always attributed to an “accident”.
- Needing to be alone for long periods of time (especially in bedroom or bathroom).
- Chronic interpersonal challenges leading to social withdrawal and isolation.
- Following the self-injury, the individual may experience severe distress, guilt and shame.

Intervention: How to Help?

If you are concerned that someone you know may be self-harming, there are a number of supportive strategies that can help guide the individual to help. At the same time, there are some non-supportive actions of which to be aware. First and foremost, avoid judgement or criticism as this can cause the individual to withdraw even more and perpetuate the cycle of self-harm. Secondly, don't assume that the behavior is a means to get attention; take every sign seriously. To offer support, the following is recommended:

- **Learn about the problem-** understanding why he/she may be self-harming can help you see the world from his/her eyes.
- **Listen-** by listening you can better understand what is happening and why.
- **Be supportive and offer encouragement-** let them know you are available whenever they want to talk or need support.
- **Encourage communication-** bring up the subject in a caring, non-confrontational way so that he/she feels safe talking about their feelings. i.e. “I've noticed injuries on your body, and I want to understand what you're going through”.
- **Encourage them to seek help-** A trained professional can assist in developing new coping techniques and strategies to stop self-harming, while helping to get to the root of the self-harm behavior.

For additional guidance, the below link to the resource guide from the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery, *Information for Parents: What you need to know about self-injury*, is a great place to start. S.A.F.E Alternatives is likewise an informative online resource and information line.

<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/parenting-2.pdf>

S.A.F.E. Alternatives:

Information Line (1-800-DONT-CUT)

Website: <https://selfinjury.com/>

References: National Alliance on Mental Illness; Mental Health America; American Psychological Association; American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry