

# Understanding Self-Injury

Self-injury, clinically known as non-suicidal self-injury or NSSI, is defined as deliberately injuring oneself without suicidal intent (The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery). Self-injury can be performed on any part of the body but most often occurs on hands, arms, stomach, and thighs. While severity can range from superficial wounds to lasting disfigurement, the act of self-injury is often a dangerous sign of emotional distress. Adolescents and young adults are at the highest risk for self-injury, with the average age of onset around 13. Researching accurate statistics on self-injury can be difficult. It has been found that about 15% of adolescents engage in NSSI. However, this statistic may be higher, due to the stigma involved in admitting to self-harm.

Cutting is one of the most common behaviors associated with self-injury but it can also include behaviors such as scratching, burning, pulling hair, and self-bruising (this may involve hitting objects with the goal of hurting oneself, or involve hitting oneself directly). Learning that a child may be engaging in self-harm behavior can result in a range of emotions for parents and caregivers, including fear, disbelief, helplessness, shock, and sadness. While these are perfectly natural reactions, it's vital to understand why these behaviors emerge, and inform yourself in how to best support a child in this situation.

It is important to note that self-injury itself is not a mental health condition but is a behavior that can be associated with mental health conditions such as eating disorders, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Self-injury 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-injury, possible reasons include a need to:

- Cope with seemingly insurmountable problems
- Express feelings that can't be put into words
- Distract from stressors of life
- Release emotional pain (emptiness, guilt, rage)
- Feel "something" besides numbness or emptiness



Those that self-injure 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-injury only provides temporary relief, while the underlying reasons that may trigger self-harm behaviors remain if they aren't addressed. Discovering and addressing the inciting behavior is necessary in order to begin healing.

Signs of self-injury 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.

- An unwillingness to wear clothes that reveal the arms and wrists.
- Recurring new wounds such as scrapes, cuts or abrasions, lacerations, or bruises.
- Being in possession of odd or unexplainable items, such as razor blades or needles.
- 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.

If you are concerned that someone you know may be self-injuring, 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 to be aware of. First and foremost, avoid judgment or criticism, this can cause the individual to withdraw even more and perpetuate the cycle of self-injury. Experts also caution against “overreacting”. While self-injury can bring up an array of emotions, reacting with emotions such as shock, panic, frustration, and anger are unhelpful. Instead, it is recommended to remain calm and understanding of the situation, in order to avoid making them feel judged or stigmatized. To offer support, the following is recommended:

- **Learn about the problem-** Understanding why a young person is self-injuring can help you see the world through their eyes.
- **Encourage communication-** Bring up the subject in a calm, caring, non-confrontational way so that they feel safe talking about their feelings. For example, “I’ve noticed injuries on your body, and I want to understand what you’re going through”.
- **Listen-** By empathetically listening, you can better understand what is happening and why.
- **Provide validation-** Validate that self-injury serves a purpose for the individual as well as how hard it can be to talk about. For example, “It sounds like self-injury gives you a sense of relief when you are in a lot of emotional pain. That sounds like a really difficult experience for you. I appreciate your willingness to talk to me about this, I am sure it isn’t easy”.
- **Be supportive and offer encouragement-** Let them know you are available whenever they want to talk or need support.
- **Encourage them to seek help-** A trained professional can assist in developing new coping techniques and strategies to stop self-injuring while helping to get to the root of the behavior.

For additional guidance, the Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery has a helpful resource page with information for parents, caregivers, youth-serving adults, and schools.

<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/resources.html>

References: American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery, Mayo Clinic, Mental Health America, National Alliance on Mental Illness

## The Cost of Success: Pressure to Achieve

A report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation notes that excessive pressure to excel ranks right up with poverty, trauma, and discrimination as factors hurting adolescent wellness. Today's teens are experiencing higher expectations and pressure to succeed in ways previous generations did not (American Psychological Association). Parents, coaches, teachers, peers, and society can all be sources of pressure in a teenager's life. However, it should be noted, that teens can also put a great deal of pressure on themselves in an effort to accomplish ambitious goals. Standardized testing and academic pressure, increased competition for college scholarships, over scheduling of extracurricular activities, a culture of achievement, and unrealistic expectations driven by social media, all have the potential to create an abundance of pressure on today's youth. While setting goals for achievement can be healthy, the constant pressure can be harmful and result in negative consequences. For example, teens who feel an increased pressure to perform and achieve may experience higher rates of mental illness such as depression or anxiety, lower rates of self-esteem, and sleep problems that interfere in overall well-being.



The good news is there are some things that parents and adults can do to help support healthier outcomes for youth who are experiencing higher levels of pressure to achieve and succeed. Below are a few suggestions to help teens overcome these challenges.

- **Prioritize unstructured time with friends and family:** Parents/guardians and other adults can play a role by helping youth to achieve balance. Teens need to learn not only how to work hard and prepare for the future, but also need time to be kids and unwind free of the pressures of life. The brains of teens are still developing. We can't expect them to adequately handle the same pressures and demands that mature adults can. Teaching teens about time management, encouraging them to take breaks and making sure they are making space for downtime and activities they enjoy can foster important coping skills.
- **Normalize asking for help:** Check in with teens frequently, even if they appear to be managing their responsibilities and holding it together. Teens who may be struggling under pressure may be suffering in silence. Clinical experts agree it is important to help teens recognize when they are feeling overwhelmed and offer them an open space to talk about what is going on internally. Asking for help is a positive coping skill that can help ease some of the pressure that kids are experiencing. Adults can help facilitate conversations by asking open-ended questions to help teens process their thoughts, emotions and experiences.

- **Teach and encourage healthy habits:** Self-care strategies can make a big impact in helping to reduce stress levels and improve mental health. Good sleep is especially important. Teenagers should get eight to ten hours of sleep per night. Sleep problems can actually contribute to the onset and worsening of different mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety and even suicidal ideation. Check-in with teenagers to discuss sleep habits, stress management strategies, technology/social media consumption and overall health and wellness. If they are struggling in these areas, they may need some adult guidance and monitoring to help get them on track.
- **Talk about how to cope with setbacks, perceived failure and challenges:** Help teens reframe how they think about failure. Offer the perspective that setbacks are part of life and can be an important opportunity to learn and develop skills they will need to succeed such as emotional resilience, coping skills and problem-solving. Guiding your teen to think through and plan ahead for how they might respond to not achieving a desired outcome can also help prepare them for setbacks.
- **Step in when there are signs of trouble:** Monitor your teen’s mood and recognize when commitments and activities provide stress rather than enjoyment. For teens that are feeling an intense amount of pressure and high expectations, this can mean encouraging and supporting them to take something off of their plate if their mental health is starting to decline. Sometimes teens feel like they may disappoint adults in their lives by dropping an AP course or giving up an extracurricular activity. When teens are trying to balance multiple activities on top of school work, the pressure can grow quickly. Experts note that teaching teens to value their well-being over their achievements can go a long way.

Setting goals and establishing expectations for desired achievements isn’t a bad thing. However, when youth begin to see their worth in their achievements, rather than who they are as human beings, harmful outcomes such as self-criticism, exhaustion, anxiety, high levels of stress and even depression can result. If you are worried about a young person in your life, a consultation with a qualified mental health professional may be helpful.

References: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association; Childmind Institute; National Education Association; Psychology Today, VeryWell Family

## **A Refresher on Youth Alcohol Use**

Continually, we hear in the news about vaping, marijuana use, prescription medications (such as Fentanyl), and the dangers they present to our youth. While these are pressing issues that need to be discussed, it's important to remember some of the less covered substance-use issues. For instance, alcohol remains the highest used and most abused substance amongst our youth. According to the Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor Student Survey (NRPFSS) report:

- Both nationally and in Nebraska, more youth report using alcohol than any other substance, including vaping products, marijuana, and non-prescribed prescription medication.
- Nebraska's youth reported that by 12<sup>th</sup> grade, almost 60% of them have tried alcohol, and 32% have of them have consumed alcohol within the last month.
- Nebraska's youth alcohol use is higher than the average youth alcohol use across the nation.

It's true that there is a wide, varied road that leads to alcohol use in adolescents, and that there is no easy remedy or cure-all to fix the issue. However, it's important to remember that parents and role models play a leading role in preventing the use of alcohol among youth. In fact, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, 80% of teens say their parents are the biggest influence in their decision to drink. A vital first step in prevention is having an open conversation about alcohol use. Experts say that these conversations should begin early, and happen often. It's recommended that you discuss the subject as early as the age of nine, to ensure that your child is informed before social media or peers can misdirect them. Additionally, it's important to continue discussing the topic as they mature. These open conversations will build trust with your adolescent, and allows opportunities for them to ask questions and learn more from a reliable source.

Given the time of the year, with proms and graduations just around the bend, it's an extremely important time to make sure you've spoken with your child about alcohol use. While these conversations can be awkward, it's a small step that can help them avoid terrible situations

and accidents. When discussing alcohol with your kids, prevention experts recommend the following tips:

- Stay informed about underage drinking, as well as the risks associated with youth alcohol use.
- Rely on information from credible sources. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA or NIDA teen), the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the Partnership to End Addiction are all excellent resources to trust.
- Talk honestly about the dangers of underage drinking and establish clear rules about not drinking while under age.
- Emphasize the legal consequences of MIP's and MIC's and their impact on a child's future.
- Set expectations about what your child should do if offered alcohol. For example, "If you're feeling pressured to drink, text me and I'll pick you up."
- Talk about choices and consequences to help them take responsibility for their decisions.
- Teach and encourage healthy coping skills to deal with issues like school, social, or family stress, as well as peer pressure.

For further information on Youth Alcohol use, please follow the links below for a few more helpful resources.

Talk Heart 2 Heart

<https://talkheart2heart.org/>

SAMHSA: "Talk. They Hear You." Substance Use Prevention Campaign Resources

<https://www.samhsa.gov/underage-drinking/parent-resources>

MADD: "Power of Parents" Handbooks

<https://www.madd.org/the-solution/power-of-parents/#resources>

School Community Intervention and Prevention

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