

HELPING YOUTH WHO SELF-HARM



What is self-harm?

Self-harm happens when youth try to hurt themselves on purpose. In most cases, there is no intention to commit suicide.

Common ways youth harm themselves include:

- ▶ Cutting themselves
- ▶ Scratching or picking their skin
- ▶ Burning their skin
- ▶ Taking too much medication, but not enough to kill them

How common is self-harm?

A Canadian study found that 16% of youth have self-harmed. Self-injury among girls has increased by 110% in recent years and girls are four times more likely to self-harm than boys. Self-injury usually starts between ages 13 and 15. Many mental-health symptoms are associated with self-injury, particularly depression, anxiety, and poor impulse control.

Why do youth hurt themselves?

Youth use self-harm behaviours as a way to try to cope with stress. Some of the reasons behind self-harm include:

- ▶ Getting rid of painful or distressing feelings
- ▶ Dealing with feelings of numbness
- ▶ Communicating pain or distress to others
- ▶ Low self-esteem and poor self-identity
- ▶ Perceived lack of control in relationships

Often, the physical pain of self-harm might feel easier to deal with than the emotional pain that's behind it. It can also make a young person feel like they're in control of at least one part of their life. Sometimes it can also be a way for them to punish themselves for something they've done or have been accused of doing. Self-harm brings individuals relief. The problem is that the relief that comes from self-harming doesn't last very long and it also creates its own problems.

How do self-harm behaviours develop?

- ▶ **Vulnerable person.** Self harm happens more often in people who have family members who have self-harmed or to those who have lived through difficult experiences.
- ▶ **Internal stresses.** A lack of feelings inside (feeling numb or empty) or too many feelings, like anger, anxiety, or depression.
- ▶ **External stressors.** Such as, school, relationships, or difficulties at home.
- ▶ **Unhealthy coping.** Youth use self-harm because they feel overwhelmed or haven't yet learned healthier ways to cope. On the positive side, at least they are trying to cope! Healthier coping behaviour includes, calling a friend, exercising, listening to music, writing, or problem solving.

How is self-harm treated?

1. **Figuring out 'triggers':** Helping youth figure out what stresses lead to self-harm urges.
2. **Improving problem-solving:** Helping youth find better ways to deal with stressful situations. For example, using distraction or changing the situation.
3. **Learning to control emotions:** Helping youth to identify their feelings, and find healthier ways to handle them.
4. **Changing unhealthy thoughts:** Helping youth identify unhelpful thoughts, such as "nobody loves me", and replace them with more positive thoughts, such as "I can get through this."
5. **Boosting social skills:** Helping youth communicate better so that they can handle conflicts and get support from others.

Often, self-harm requires professional help. A professional will initially assess for suicidal ideation and then help the youth to control their urge to cut by using healthier coping strategies.

How parents can help in the short term

- ▶ **Show you care.** Let your child or teen know that you care, "I love you and I'm worried about you."
- ▶ **Accept your child's feelings.** Remember that your child or teen may be feeling very stressed or upset. Ask, "How can I help?" or "How can I support you?"
- ▶ **Learn basic First Aid.** Learn how to take care of any cuts or other self-injuries. For minor cuts or injuries, wash with mild soap and water so that they don't get infected. For more serious cutting that may need medical care (like stitches), offer to take your child or teen to the nearest walk-in clinic, doctor's office, or hospital emergency room.
- ▶ **Be non-judgmental.** Let your child or teen know that if they want to talk about their self-harm (and stress), that you are ready to listen without judging. You might say: "I'm worried about you. If there's something you want to talk about, let me know. I promise I'll listen, and I won't get upset or angry with you, no matter what it is. I love you no matter what."
- ▶ **Suggest distractions.** While distractions are not long-term solutions, they can be good alternatives to self harm in the short term.

What doesn't help

- ▶ **Avoid guilt trips.** Making your child or teen feel guilty or ashamed will not help. Showing youth how disgusted or repulsed you are by their behaviour will not help either. This can make youth feel bad about themselves, cause them to lose trust in you, and not want to be with you.
- ▶ **Don't tell your child or teen to 'just stop' self-harming.** Self-harm is a way of coping. It can even be dangerous to take away your child or teen's way of coping when they haven't yet learned healthier ways to cope. **Without a way to cope, your child or teen may act on impulses to end his/her life.** At the very least, telling your teen to 'just stop' can make it hard for your teen to trust you or make them feel like a failure.

Supporting a youth over the long term

Ask your child or teen about stresses that might be adding to the self-harm. Try saying something like, "What makes you feel like hurting yourself?" If your child responds, "I don't know!", list some choices: teachers, school work, boy/girlfriends, bullying etc.

Help your child or teen to solve problems that are causing stress.

1. Find goals or solutions: Ask, "What do you wish could be different (with the stress or 'trigger')?"
2. Come up with possible solutions to try: Ask, "What could we try? What could you try?"
3. Try out a solution: Ask, "What would you like to try first?"
4. Evaluate whether or not the solution helped: Ask, "How do you think that worked out?"

Coping with your own emotions

When parents find out their child has been self-harming, they often have feelings similar to grief and loss reactions, such as denial, fear, and guilt. Parents will often report feelings of embarrassment and wonder how the parents will view them if they find out.

If you are in this situation, it is important to give yourself permission to feel any emotion that comes up as no emotion is 'wrong'. Also, accepting your emotions is a good way to model healthy reactions for your child. However, it is also important not to act based on these first reactions. Take time away from your child and then come back and build a collaborative plan of action. It is also important to understand that no one is to 'blame' in this situation.

"Extreme Parenting" Styles and Self-Harm

No matter what stresses led to the self-harm, positive parenting can help. Parenting styles that are at the extremes may add to stress for not only youth, but also for parents. The challenge is to find a balance between two opposing extremes. On the one side, being too permissive, and on the other, being too authoritarian. The middle ground is a 'backbone' parent, or being 'authoritative'.

Too permissive

"Anything goes"

- Not enough rules
- Not concerned enough
- Not taking problem behaviours seriously
- Not protecting enough
- Giving too much independence

Too authoritarian

"My way or the highway"

- Too many rules
- Too concerned
- Taking problems too seriously
- Being over protective
- Not giving enough independence

Authoritative Balance



Children and youth do best when parents try to find an "authoritative" balance.

"Fair, but firm"

1. Giving your children guidance and rules so they can figure out how to be responsible.
2. Giving your children more freedom as they show more responsibility.
3. Spending time with your children, talking, doing activities or just hanging out to build a healthy relationship

ALTERNATIVES TO SELF-HARM

Here are some harm-reduction strategies you can share with your child to help him/her get through the urge to self-harm. Harm reduction strategies work well in the short term. For best results, they should be combined with problem-solving strategies listed above.

If you self-harm to express pain and intense emotions

- Paint, draw, or scribble on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint
- Express your feelings in a journal
- Compose a poem or song to say what you feel
- Write down any negative feelings and then rip the paper up
- Listen to music that expresses what you're feeling

If you self-harm to calm and soothe yourself

- Take a bath or hot shower
- Pet or cuddle with a dog or cat
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Massage your neck, hands, and feet
- Listen to calming music

If you self-harm because you feel disconnected and numb

- Call a friend (you don't have to talk about self-harm)
- Take a cold shower
- Chew something with a very strong taste, like chili peppers, peppermint, or a grapefruit peel
- Go online to a self-help website, chat room, or message board

If you self-harm to release tension or vent anger

- Exercise vigorously—run, dance, jump rope, or hit a punching bag
- Punch a cushion or mattress or scream into your pillow
- Squeeze a stress ball or squish Play-Doh or clay
- Rip something up (sheets of paper, a magazine)
- Make some noise (play an instrument, bang on pots and pans)

Substitutes for the cutting sensation

- Use a red pen to mark where you usually cut
- Rub ice across your skin where you usually cut
- Put rubber bands on wrists, arms, or legs, and snap them instead of cutting
- Draw or have someone draw a butterfly on the place you usually cut and name it after someone special to you. However, if you cut, you kill the butterfly. To keep the butterfly alive you have to let it fade on its own.