

A Parent's Guide to Self Harm in Teenagers

Self-harm, or self-injury, describes a wide range of things people deliberately do to themselves that are harmful but usually do not kill them. Self harm can be very hard for parents or carers to understand or come to terms with.

Cutting the arms or the back of the legs with a razor or knife is the most common form of self-harm, but self-harm can take many forms, including burning, biting, hitting or taking overdoses.

A young person may self-harm to help them cope with negative feelings, to feel more in control or to punish themselves. It can be a way of relieving overwhelming feelings that build up inside, when they feel isolated, angry, guilty or desperate.

Self harm can lead to infection, permanent damage and even accidental death. It is therefore important to seek professional advice if your child is self-harming.

A way of coping....

Deliberate self-harm may be used as a way to cope with experiences and the strong feelings associated with them. Self-harm can:

- **Provide a way to express difficult or hidden feelings:** It is not uncommon for young people to feel numb or empty as a result of overwhelming feelings they may be experiencing, and engaging in deliberate self-harm may provide them with a temporary sense of feeling again. It may also provide a way to express anger, sadness, grief or hurt.
- **Be a way of communicating to people that they need some support:** When they feel unable to use words or any other way to do so.
- **Be a way of proving to themselves that they are not invisible.**
- **Provide them with a feeling of control:** Young people might feel that self-harm is one way they can have a sense of control over their life, feelings, or body, especially if they feel as if other things in their life are out of control.
- Deliberate self-harm can bring an immediate sense of relief but it is only a temporary solution. It can also cause permanent damage to the body. Psychologically, it may be associated with a sense of guilt, depression, low self-esteem or self-hatred along with a tendency to isolate themselves from others.

Why do young people harm themselves?

Young people who self-harm have often had very difficult or painful experiences or relationships. These may include:

- Bullying or discrimination
- Losing someone close to them such as a parent, brother, sister or friend
- Lack of love and affection or neglect by parents or carers
- Physical or sexual abuse
- A serious illness that affects the way they feel about themselves.

Other young people may start to self-harm as a way of dealing with the problems and pressures of everyday life. Pressure can come from family, school and peer groups to conform or to perform well (for example in getting good exam results). Young people can be made to feel angry, frustrated or bad about themselves if they cannot live up to other people's expectations.

Young people who self-harm may have low self-esteem. For some this is linked to poor body image, eating disorders, or drug misuse. Understanding why young people self-harm involves knowing as much as possible about their life and lifestyles.

Peer pressures may also be an explanation for self-harm. Young people may find themselves among friends or other groups who self-harm and may be encouraged or pressurised to do the same.

How common is self-harm?

Self-harm is more common than people realise. It's impossible to say exactly how many young people self-harm because:

- Many young people hurt themselves secretly before finding the courage to tell someone
- Many of them never ask for counselling or medical help
- There is no standard definition of self-harm used in research
- There are no national statistics on self-harm currently available

However, the best evidence we have suggests:

- Self-harm is most common in children over the age of 11 and can increase in frequency with age. It is uncommon in very young children although there is evidence of children as young as five trying to harm themselves.
- Some children and young people will self harm just once or a couple of times but for others it's an ongoing struggle which can last up to the age of 25.
- Self-harm is more common amongst girls and young women than amongst boys and young men. Studies indicate that, amongst young people over 13 years of age, approximately three times as many females as males harm themselves.
- A national survey of children and adolescents carried out in the community found that 5 per cent of boys and 8 per cent of girls aged 13-15 said that they had, at some time, tried to harm or hurt themselves.
- In the same national survey, rates of self-harm reported by parents were much lower than the rates of self-harm reported by children. This suggests that many parents are unaware that their children are self-harming.
- A study carried out in schools in 2002 found that 11 per cent of girls and 3 per cent of boys aged 15 and 16 said they had harmed themselves in the previous year.

Why asking for help can be difficult

There are many reasons why young people may find it difficult to ask for help:

- Not knowing who to ask
- Not knowing that confidential help is available

- Feeling too ashamed or bad about themselves
- Being worried that whoever they tell will be shocked or angry with them
- Being frightened of being labelled mad, suicidal or attention-seeking
- Bad or negative experiences in the past may make it difficult for them to trust people
- If they have been abused or neglected they may feel they are better off dealing with things on their own
- Feeling worried they may be forced into treatment they don't want.

How friends and families can help

It may not be easy to accept the fact that someone you care about self-harms or to understand why they do it. There are things you can do to help, such as;

- Listening
- Offering to go with them to tell someone
- Offering to tell someone for them
- Encouraging them to get professional help
- Finding information for them
- Offering to go with them to an appointment with a health professional or counsellor

If you want to support someone

Remember that they are extremely distressed and that self-harm may be the only way they have of communicating their feelings.

- Allowing them to talk about how they feel is probably the most important thing you can do for them. Just feeling that someone is listening and that they are finally being heard can really help. Good listening is a skill. Always let the person finish what they are saying and, while they are talking, try not to be thinking of the next thing you are going to say.
- Be clear and honest about your feelings. Explain that their behaviour upsets you but that you understand it helps them to cope.
- Take them seriously and respect their feelings. Don't tease them or call them 'mad' or 'mental'.
- Don't blame them for hurting themselves. Try to avoid being critical even if you feel shocked by what they are saying. This may make them feel even more alone and prevent them talking to anyone else.
- Don't ask them to promise never to self-harm again. They may well do it again and then feel guilty about breaking their promises.

If you don't feel able to talk to them about their self-harm

- It's best to be honest about this, both with them and yourself. It doesn't mean you don't love them or care about them.
- Try not to express your feelings about their self-harming in an angry way as this is likely to make the situation worse.
- Consider helping in some other way such as finding information for them or helping them find a counsellor, support group or organisation that can help them.

- Don't try to force this assistance on them if they don't feel ready to stop.

Useful Contacts

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

CAMHS provide a wide range of services that offer help, support and treatment to children and young people up to the age of 18. Like local health teams they have different specialist staff who can help with lots of different emotional and mental health problems.

Tel: 0114 2261921

Centenary House
Heritage Park
55 Albert Terrace Rd
S6 3BR

Sheffield NSPCC Young People's Centre

35-37 George Street,
Sheffield S1 2PF
Tel: 0114 228 9200.

They offer counselling and support for young people. Referral should be by the young person themselves and not parents or carers

- Check out the Ask Sid website www.asksid.net and put "Self Harm" in the keywords box
- www.thesite.org is a cool website set up to support young people who self harm and the people who care about them (Click health & wellbeing, then mental health and then self harm)
- www.mind.org.uk
Put Self Harm in the search box
- Your child can talk to Childline in confidence on 0800 11 11
- You can call Parentline on 0808 800 2222 or check out the Parentline Plus website www.parentlineplus.org.uk

The following books are available from the Sheffield Information Link library and have sections on self harm:

"Understanding 12 – 14-year-olds" by M. Waddell

"Helping Your Teenager Beat Depression" by K. Manassis

"Are U a Teenage Health Freak" by A. Macfarlane