

# Self-Harm

What You Need to Know and What To Do



Presented by Precious Life Suicide Prevention

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## Self-harm and Attempted Suicide

Self-harm is also commonly known as self-injurious behavior (SIB), self-mutilation, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), parasuicide, deliberate self-harm (DSH), self-abuse, and self-inflicted violence

As one would expect, having multiple terms for self-harm creates misunderstanding and confusion both in academic research and in clinical settings.

Self-harm and suicide attempts can also seem very similar. Sometimes this can result in incorrect treatment assessments

Some researchers classify all forms of self-injury on a suicidal platform (preceding suicidal ideation), regardless of the victim's intent. Others emphasize the marked differences between self-harm and attempted suicide, and believe they should be separate areas.

The majority of those who self-injure do not have suicidal thoughts when self-injuring

Although self-harm is not the same as suicide, self-harm can escalate into suicidal behaviors. The intent to die can change over time. One study found that almost half of people who self-harm reported at least one suicide attempt

Because self-harm can become suicide, it is highly recommended that every patient who self-harms be assessed for suicide risk

## Is Self-Harm a Mental Illness?

Self-harm or self-injury is not a mental illness. Rather, it is an unhealthy coping mechanism associated with an underlying mental health condition. Several illnesses are associated with self-harming, including borderline personality disorder, depression, eating disorders, anxiety, and PTSD.

## Why do people self-harm?

People are more likely be at risk for self-harming behaviors if certain factors are present, such as:

- Loss of a parent;
- Childhood illness or surgery;
- Childhood sexual or physical abuse;
- Family substance abuse;
- Negative body image perceptions;
- Lack of impulse control;
- Childhood trauma;
- Neglect;
- Lack of strong family attachments.
- To feel better
  - Self-harm can release pent-up feelings such as anger and anxiety, or, people who feel numb use self-harm as a way to feel “something”
- To communicate their emotional pain
  - Those who self-harm for this reason will obviously display their wounds as a way of reaching out for help.

- To feel a sense of control
  - People who self-harm may feel powerless and lack self-esteem. Self-harm may be used as a way to regain control. This is particularly common for those who have suffered abuse. There is often a pronounced feeling of powerlessness, self-loathing, and an absence of self-esteem.
- To punish themselves
  - People who self-harm may lack self-esteem and think they are at fault for the way they feel.

## **How can you tell if someone is self-harming?**

People who self-harm may:

- appear withdrawn, or are unusually quiet or reserved;
- stop participating in their regular activities;
- have rapid mood changes;
- get angry or upset easily;
- have had a significant event in their lives, e.g. a breakup with significant other;
- suffer poor academic/school performance when they usually do very well;
- exhibit unexplained cuts or scratches;
- wear clothes that are inappropriate for the weather, e.g. wearing long sleeves on hot day.

## **What Are the Different Types of Self-Harm?**

Not all forms of self-harm look the same. One of the most common of the different types of self-harm is cutting, using a knife or other sharp object. Often people cut themselves as a kind of ritual that leaves patterns on the skin. They may carve words or symbols on their skin.

## **Forms of self-harm, including one or more of the following:**

- Scratching, biting, or burning the skin
- Hitting or punching themselves or the walls
- Piercing their skin with sharp objects
- Pulling out hair
- Picking at scabs and wounds
- Inserting objects into the body
- Overdosing on drugs or drinking to excess
- Exercising to the point of collapse or injury
- Getting into fights in which they are likely to be hurt
- Banging head or body against walls and hard objects
- Having unsafe sex.

## **Complications and Consequences of Self-Injury**

Self-injury can cause dangerous and even fatal health consequences. Furthermore, it can have a continued negative impact on mental health.

## **Possible complications of self-harm include:**

- Increased shame, guilt, and low self-esteem
- Wound infections
- Permanent scars or disfigurement
- Broken bones
- Isolation that results in losing friendships
- Higher risk of major depression, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide.

## **What to Do When a Loved One is Self-Harming**

When a loved one is self-harming, encouraging them to get treatment is the most important goal. Parents or guardians should take the necessary steps to get professional help for their child or teen. Your pediatrician is a good place to start.

Teenagers whose friends are struggling with self-harm should suggest that they talk to their parents, a school counselor, a teacher, or another trusted adult.

Subsequently, family members and friends can support loved ones in a variety of ways. First, don't be angry with your loved one, even if you're scared or confused. Yelling, threats, and criticism won't help. In fact, they may even increase the risk of continued self-mutilation.

Also, face your own discomfort or confusion about self-harming. Moreover, educate yourself about this behavior and why it happens. Thus, you can learn about the symptoms, the different types of self-harm, the underlying issues, and how to help prevent relapse.

Furthermore, remember not to judge the person. Most likely, they already feel distressed and ashamed. Express your caring and your support, no matter what. Let the person know that you're available to talk about what they're going through if they'd like to share. In addition, find ways to spend time together doing healthy, positive activities.

## **Treatment for Self-Harming Behavior**

Treatment for self-injury addresses the root causes of the self-destructive behavior. Therefore, treatment for anxiety or depression may be necessary. Other underlying issues might include low self-esteem, dysfunctional family dynamics, or other mental health conditions, such as borderline personality disorder.

In addition, teens learn new coping mechanisms for dealing with difficult circumstances or painful emotions. Treatment provides them with different ways to stop self-harm behaviors by substituting other, healthier behaviors, such as breathing exercises and compassionate self-talk.

For some adolescents who injure themselves, residential or outpatient treatment may be appropriate. Therapists may offer one or more of the following modalities for addressing different forms of self-harm.

## **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps teens to identify and modify thought and behavior patterns. Therefore, they learn how to shift their outlook from the negative toward the positive and how to identify triggers for self-harm.

## **Dialectical Behavioral Therapy:**

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) helps teens acknowledge that they are using self-harm to cope with underlying issues. Subsequently, they develop ways to modify this behavior. In addition, they address the root causes of self-harming.

## **Replacing Self-Injury with Positive Coping Skills**

Here are some effective strategies that can help teens replace self-harm with positive experiences. Moreover, these different ways to stop self-harm will also help teenagers build self-esteem and authentic connections.

## **Social support:**

Multiple studies have shown that social relationships improve mental and physical health. The more support we have, the more resilient we are. Teens who self-injure will benefit from finding people they trust, who care about what they're going through. Their support network can include family, peers, guidance counselors, and mentors.

## **Unplugging:**

Unfortunately, teens who self-harm sometimes find websites that support or glamorize this behavior. Therefore, they are drawn back into the habit. Thus, unplugging as much as possible is important for teens who engage in different forms of self-harm. Moreover, reducing digital media activity will support mental health overall.

## **Exercise:**

Research shows that exercise supports mental health by increasing the body's production of endorphins. These are the brain's "feel good" chemicals. Moreover, doing a physical activity can increase a teen's feelings of mastery and self-confidence. As a result, they feel less of an urge to self-harm.

## **Take Control:**

For some people, getting the facts and making plans can help counteract stress and negative emotions. If teens have a big project looming, they can create a schedule that will keep them on track. If they're facing an unknown situation, they can do some research so they know what to expect. Therefore, teens are able to reduce feelings of being out of control. Thus, self-harming behavior also goes down.

## **Creativity:**

Writing, art, music, and dance can all serve as ways to express emotions. For example, writing about what's creating stress and anxiety in your life helps you to identify outside stressors. Moreover, it can help you pinpoint what's going on internally.

## **What to Do in an Emergency**

In conclusion, while self-harm is not the same as a suicide attempt, it can be life threatening. Therefore, take these emergency actions if someone is actively self-harming:

- Do not leave the person alone.
- Remove anything that could be used in a suicide attempt, including firearms, alcohol, drugs, razors, or other sharp objects.
- Call the US National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).
- Take the person to an emergency room or seek help from a medical or mental health professional.