

SELF-INJURY AND YOUTH

DAUPHIN COUNTY MH/ID
SEPTEMBER 2016 RESOURCE SHARING

Self-injury often begins around the ages of 12 to 14, and it is most commonly the result of feelings of sadness, distress, anxiety, or confusion. Teenagers often use self-injury as a way to cope with these negative emotions. Recent studies have found that one-third to one-half of adolescents in the US have engaged in some type of non-suicidal self-injury, although some studies put the rate at 13 to 23 percent.

Self-injury, also known as self-harm, self-mutilation, or self-abuse, occurs when someone intentionally and repeatedly harms herself/himself in a way that is impulsive and not intended to be lethal.

The most common methods are:

- Skin cutting (70%-90%)
- Head banging or hitting (21%-44%),
- Burning (15%-35%)

Other forms of self-injury include excessive scratching to the point of drawing blood, punching self or objects, infecting oneself, inserting objects into body openings, drinking something harmful (like bleach or detergent), and breaking bones purposefully.

Warning signs

Warning signs that someone may be injuring themselves include:

- Unexplained frequent injuries including cuts and burns,
- Low self-esteem,
- Difficulty handling feelings,
- Relationship problems or avoidance of relationships, and
- Poor functioning at work, school, or home.

People who self-injure may attempt to conceal their marks, such as bruises, scabs or scars with clothing, and you may notice them wearing inappropriate clothing like long sleeves and pants in hot weather. If discovered, a person who self-injures may often make excuses as to how an injury happened (for instance, "I fell" or "the cat scratched me").

Tips for Parents

Do:

- Be patient
- Learn about self-injury
- Address the issue as soon as possible
- Accept your child's feelings. Remember that this is different from accepting the behavior.
- Speak to your child in calm tones, offer reassurance, and be a respectful listener.
- Check in on how your child is doing regularly.
- Ask them what they need for support in order to stop their self-injury.
- Take your child seriously.
- Give praise for positive change as you see it.
- Focus on your child. Find supports to help you work through your own feelings and needs so that you can focus on supporting your child.
- Take care of yourself. Model what good self-care looks like.
- Maintain hope. Recovery takes time and feels difficult, but don't give up.

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Do Not:

- Think of ongoing self-injury as failures. Getting better is a process and “relapsing” in self-injury happens.
- Responding in hurtful ways (yelling, giving harsh and lengthy punishments, threats, insults, etc.) increases stress for everyone and creates barriers to getting better.
- Fight for power or control.
- Rationalize the behavior by thinking that your teen is just going through a phase that will be outgrown.
- Minimize the seriousness of this behavior.
- Isolate your child.
- Focus on the self-injury. Concentrate on what is driving the behavior, not the behavior itself.

Self-Injury and Suicide

The relationship between suicide and self-injury is complicated. While people with non-suicidal self injury do not intend to complete suicide, they may cause more harm than intended, which could result in medical complications or death. In severe or prolonged cases of self-injury, a person may become desperate about their lack of control over the behavior and its addictive nature, which may lead them to true suicide attempts.

Treatment

If someone displays the signs and symptoms of self-injury, a mental health professional with self-injury expertise should be consulted. An evaluation or assessment is the first step, followed by a recommended course of treatment to prevent the self-destructive cycle from continuing.

Effective treatment of self-injury is most often a combination of medication, cognitive/behavioral therapy, and interpersonal therapy, supplemented by other treatment services as needed.

Excerpted from the articles “Self-Injury (Cutting, Self-Harm or Self-Mutilation)” (<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/self-injury>) and “Self-Injury and Youth” (<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/self-injury-and-youth>) by Mental Health America