

SELF HARM

Recognizing the Signs



SOME OTHER
SOLUTIONS
SOCIETY FOR CRISIS PREVENTION

Preface

Being a youth is hard. It is a part of your life where there are so many changes, challenges and unknowns that navigating through all of this is no small feat. Sometimes experiences and challenges in our lives leave us with intense emotional pain and managing that pain can become difficult. At Some Other Solutions Society for Crisis Prevention our mission is to empower others to overcome life's challenges, and build their capacity to support others. We support the RMWB's youth through providing a comprehensive resource guide on the subject of self-harm. This booklet was written to provide information and guidance for youth, parents and caregivers, friends and teachers of youth that is self-harming.

You will find information on what is self-harm, how to recognize the signs, how to discuss the subject of self-harm and support the youth self-harmer. Even though this guide was written with the self-harming youth in mind it also provides valuable information for the self-harming adult.

- Lize Bam
Health & Wellness Coordinator

Table of Contents

- What is self harm? And General Information.....	Page 4
- Information for youth and young adults that self-harm.....	Page 10
- Information for parents or caregivers working with youth that self-harm	Page 19
- Information for friends of youth that self-harm	Page 26
- Information for teachers	Page 28
- Sources & Resources	Page 29

What is self harm?

There are many different names for self-harm. Some of the com-mon used names are:

- Self-injury
- Deliberate self-harm (DSH)
- Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)
- Cutting
- Self-injurious behaviour (SIB)
- Self-mutilation

Because of the different names the scientific definition of self-harm can have slight differences. But essentially **it is when someone intentionally harm themselves without any conscious suicidal intent. It is a deliberate act that causes physical harm on the body, in an attempt to relieve emotional pain.**

To put it simply, self-harm is a way of coping with problems and emotional distress. Some individuals might not have the healthy coping skills to manage life's curve balls and/or healthy ways to express their emotions.

Self-harm does have links to depression and anxiety and there is increasing research evidence suggesting the overlap of self-harm and suicide ideation. Because of this overlap **self-harm should be treated with great concern and not dismissed as a phase or something that will pass.**

Misconceptions about self harm

- **It is not only females who self-harm.** Even though more females report self-harming, males also self-harm.
- Self-harm is **not an attempted suicide.**
- **Individuals that self-harm are not crazy.** Self-harm is used as a coping mechanism that you might not understand, but that does not make the self-harmers crazy.
- **Self-harm is not attention seeking behaviour in the way you think.** These individuals are struggling to cope with stress and other life events. Although some admit starting the practice as a means of getting attention, very few report this as a primary reason for continuing the practice. Even though they hide their injuries, it merits attention from others who are in the position to help.
- **Individuals who self-harm are not trying to manipulate you.** Self-harm is more about trying to cope and to relieve some tension, than manipulating others.
- **All people who self-harm does not have Borderline Personality Disorder.** Some people who engage in repetitive self-harm have reported being diagnosed with a mental illness other than Borderline Personality Disorder. But many who self-harm may not have any diagnosable disorder at all.
- **People who self-harm do not enjoy the pain.** There is no evidence to suggest that people who self-harm feel pain differently than people who don't. Sometimes feeling the pain is exactly the point as it helps them to reconnect with their body or to feel something.
- **Not all people who self-harm have been abused.** Although abuse has been reported as a reason by some individuals who self-harm. Reasons for self-harming is varied and unique to everyone.
- It is true that some can stop if they really want to, but **self-harm can also be addictive.** There is emerging evidence that suggests that endorphins are released in the brain during self-harm which increases the possibility of becoming addicted to it.
- **Someone that self-harm is not a danger to others.** It is generally a private activity and many who self-harm are

accustomed to turning their anger and frustration inward rather than outward.

Self Harm Methods

Individuals can use a variety of methods, but the most common include:

- Cutting
- Scratching
- Burning
- Hitting, biting or bruising yourself
- Abusing medication
- Ingesting hazardous material or substances
- Bone breaking
- Intentionally preventing wounds from healing

Causes/Reasons why some people self harm

The causes or experiences, also called stressors, that may lead to self-harm can be categorised as internal or external. **Internal stressors** would be thought processes, emotional reactions and unhealthy coping strategies. **External stressors** could be life events or stressful experiences. Multiple reasons can be given and it might not just be that there is one specific reason for the behaviour. Examples of internal and external stressors that may lead to self-harm

(but remember there are many others not listed below):

- Depression, anxiety, or anger
- Feeling all alone
- Negative feelings towards themselves like anger, self-dislike, inadequacy
- For distraction
- Impulsivity can also play a role
- Feeling a need to hurt or punish the self
- Feeling frustrated
- It helps them to express something that is hard to put into words
- Turn invisible thoughts or feelings into something visible
- Reduce overwhelming feelings or thoughts
- Creates a sense of being in control when feeling like they are losing control
- Trauma and escaping traumatic memories
- To stop feelings of numbness, disconnectedness and dissociation
- Express suicidal feelings and thoughts without taking their own life
- Pressures at school or work

ersistent bullying or peer rejection
nancial worries
omestic violence
ow family warmth or family conflict
ental health difficulties in the family
ychiatric disorders/mental illness
exual, physical or emotional abuse
onfusion about sexuality
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crease in stress, which could lead
listress
or parental relationships
rug and/or alcohol abuse within
family
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edia or internet influences

Who is more at risk?

Females, adolescents (but can start earlier), LGBT2SQIA+ community especially bisexual individuals, youth and children with traumatic backgrounds such as sexual abuse and domestic violence.

How does all of this work together and lead to self-harm?

The vulnerable or predisposed individual (that is someone who is more inclined to such behaviour) is someone who may have unhealthy coping strategies, may have had previous traumatic experiences or just struggle more with managing their emotions in a healthy way. They can then experience a trigger, distress, stressful event or experience or negative emotional state which may then lead to self-harm.

Immediately following the self-harm is a reduction of those negative feelings and they feel a sense of relief. But this feeling of relief could be followed by feelings of shame, guilt or disgust (Chapman 2006). The shame, guilt or disgust could be a trigger in itself that leads to self-harm or contribute towards the next act, as rarely there is just one contributing factor.

Is self-harm addictive?

Chronic overstimulation of endorphins may lead to an increase in tolerance of the opiate response and an increased need to self-harm. An endorphin "rush" occurs in self-harmers, which leads to feelings of relief and relaxation.

(Mcvey-Noble 2006)

Suicide Risk

Self-harm is not a suicide attempt. Individuals who self-harm are generally aiming to feel better and not intending on ending their lives. BUT individuals with a history of self-harm are at higher risk for suicidal thoughts and attempts. That is why it is crucial to always take self-harm serious and assess for the risk of suicide.

Should you suspect that someone might be suicidal the first step is to ask the question: "Have you been thinking about ending your life?" or "Have you been thinking about suicide?" If the answer is yes use the acronym SLAP to assess the risk (Mcvey-Noble 2006):

S.L.A.P.

S – Specificity of suicide plan. Do they have an actual thought out, specific plan or is it just an idea? That is the when, where and how? If there is a specific plan on when, where and how, the risk is higher.

L – Lethality of means. Some plans are more lethal than others. Slitting wrists, shooting themselves, jumping of a building, in front of a vehicle or hanging is much more lethal than "I don't know, I will hold my breath until I run out of air." Take all suicidal ideation seriously, but act quickly if there is a clear and dangerous means in mind.

A – Availability of means. Ask if they have access to the intended means for their suicide. If they state that he/she is going to shoot themselves and there is access to a gun the risk is extremely high. Remove the means immediately and take them to the ER or call 911.

P – Proximity of help. Evaluate the availability of helping resources. If the individual has a therapist a phone call away and supporting family and friends vs it is 4 am and their counselor is on vacation and they do not want to talk to the on call therapist. Having immediate support lowers the risk while having no immediate support could increase the risk

Artful Insight

They Don't See

A Poem by: Angela Mcrimmon

*They think that I do it from a place of hate,
But when I go too far it's just a mistake,
I don't mean to damage to the point I must seek,
Medical help and admit my defeat.
I only really meant it to take off the edge,
But I've done a little more damage instead,
They think that I mean to hurt and destroy,
They assume that this is the goal I deploy.
They don't seem to realise the times they see,
The reason I harm is to set myself free,
From the anxiety that eats me up deep inside,
There's so much self harm that I choose to hide.
They don't seem to realise there's so much more,
Harm that takes place behind my front door,
So many times that I do manage to take,
Care of my wounds so the guilt I forsake.
It doesn't come from a place of hate,
It comes from a place I just try to abate,
Escape from the ever enduring distress,
They don't seem to see I'm not always a mess.*



Information for youth and young adults that self-harm

How can I help myself?

This section is broken up into short term immediate skills that you can use right now when you have the urge to harm yourself. The long term aids you can use to better understand yourself and to develop healthier coping skills.

Short term immediate skills to use at home

If you are at home and feel the need to self-harm it can be very frightening and distressing. The authors of *When Your Child is Cutting* (Mcvey-Noble 2006) suggest using these following steps in a crisis situation (they even use it with their own clients).

The first step would be Name It – Identify the emotion that you are experiencing in the moment, the emotion that is driving the urge. Now is not the time to engage in lengthy discussions or thought processes about what set you off. Name that emotion (s) that you are experiencing right now. You are probably feeling horrible, but if you name the beast you can tame the beast, so give it your best shot. Some-times it might be easier than other times. If it is really difficult for you ask someone that you trust to help you figure out what exactly you are feeling. First identify the general category and use the following table to pinpoint the level of intensity of that particular emotion.

<u>Angry Feelings</u> Annoyed Mad Enraged	<u>Sad Feelings</u> Down Depressed Despondent	<u>Embarrassed Feelings</u> Self-conscious Embarrassed Mortified
<u>Anxious Feelings</u> Worried Anxious Terrified	<u>Numb Feelings</u> Detached Disconnected Dissociated	<u>Jealous Feelings</u> Resentful Envious Jealous
<u>Overwhelmed Feelings</u> Concerned	<u>Bored Feelings</u> Indifferent	<u>Ashamed Feelings</u> Guilty

Now that you have identified the emotion(s) you need to **Tame It**. Sometimes experiencing an intense emotion head-on is almost intolerable, you may even experience the emotion as dangerous and be afraid to feel it because you associate it with the urge to self-harm. There is no such thing as a dangerous emotion, only dangerous behaviour. Avoidance of emotions just keeps you running and makes you more vulnerable to repeated intense experiences of those feelings. When you tone down the intense emotion it may help you to tolerate experiencing it.

Please see distraction techniques or alternatives to self-harm to help you tone down the intensity of your emotion and help you not to harm yourself.

Once the urge has passed and you are safe and less emotional you can take sometime to identify what triggered the urge, why it happened and what you liked or didn't like about how you coped. This is where you **Break It Down**. Look at the long-term aids to help you identify and cope with triggers.

Distraction techniques or alternatives to self-harm

If you really want to stop but still have the urge to self-harm, delaying that urge by several minutes can be enough to make the urge fade away. If you match the distraction or substitution with how you feel, the chances increase of it helping to calm the urge. Prepare a list before hand that you can keep close by. Then when you get the urge to self-harm you can go down the list and find something that feels right to you in the moment. Here are some examples of alternatives:

Feeling angry or need to get rid of your frustrations

- Squeeze ice.
- Make a cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself.
- See how fast you can flatten aluminum cans with your feet for recycling (wearing shoes obviously!).
- Hit a punching bag or pillow, a wall with a pillow, or a tree with a stick.
- On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do. Cut and tear the picture.
- Make clay models and cut or smash them.
- Throw ice into the bath tub or against a solid wall hard enough to shatter it.
- Dance it out.
- Clean.
- Exercise.
- Throw eggs in the shower, or socks against the wall.
- Scream into a pillow.

- Yell or sing at the top of your lungs.

Feeling sad or depressed

- Do something slow and soothing.
- Take a warm and relaxing bath with scented candles and bubbles.
- Curl up under a comforter with hot chocolate and a good book.
- Hug a loved one, pet or stuffy.
- Play with a pet.
- Do something nice for someone else.
- Listen to soothing music or nature sounds.
- Call a trusted friend and just talk about things that you like.
- Visit a friend.

Craving sensation or feeling empty or unreal

- List the many uses for a random object.
- Interact with other people.
- Put your finger into frozen food like ice cream.
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew on a piece of ginger root.
- Take a cold bath or shower.
- Focus on your breathing and how your body moves with each deep breath.

Feeling guilty or like a bad person

- List as many good things about yourself as you can. Ask someone you trust if they can add to this list.
- Read something good that someone has written about you.
- Talk to someone that cares about you.
- Do something nice for someone.

Do something mindful

- Count down slowly from 10 to 0.
- Breath slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth.
- Focus on objects around you and thinking about how they look, sound, taste, and smell.
- Do yoga or meditate.
- Learn some breathing exercises and relaxation techniques.
- Concentrate on something that makes you happy: good friends, good times.

Express yourself

- Write down your feelings in a diary.
- Crying is a healthy and normal way to express your sadness or frustration.
- Draw, colour or play an instrument.
- Write a conversation between the part of you that wants to self-harm and the part that doesn't want to.
- Write a letter to the person or situation bothering you but don't send it.
- Write a poem.

Some alternative distraction or substitution techniques

- Put stickers on the parts of your body you want to injure.
- Draw on yourself with a red felt-tip pen or non-toxic markers on the area where you feel you want to harm yourself.
- Taking a small bottle of liquid red food colouring, warm it slightly. Uncap the bottle and press its tip against the place you want to cut. Draw the bottle in a cutting motion while squeezing it slightly to let the food colour trickle out.
- Paint yourself with red washable paint.
- Draw on the part of your body that you want to hurt with an ice cube.
- Snap an elastic band against your wrist.
- Go for a walk and take in the beauty of nature or if it is night time go stargazing.
- Call a help line.

Remember that these strategies will not give you the same relief as the self-harm, because you need to give your brain time to rewire and recognize the new way of coping. This will also take time, so be patient with yourself and find the healthier strategy that works for you.



Long-term aids

Recovering from self-harm is going to take a lot of hard work and does not happen over night.

1. Try and keep a notebook with all your long-term information. You can have the questions in the front and write down some thoughts on that as you learn more about yourself. (Smith 2016) Learn to recognize the triggers – Triggers are the things that give you the urge to engage in self-harming behaviour. This could be anything from a place, certain people or feelings, situations or sensations. Write down what was happening and how you were feeling just before harming yourself. Become aware of the urge and how your body reacts. Urges can include physical sensations like:

- Racing heart or feelings of heaviness
- Strong emotions like sadness or anger
- A disconnection from yourself or a loss of sensation
- Repetitive thoughts
- Unhealthy decisions, like working too hard to avoid feelings

Recognizing your urges will help you to take the necessary steps towards reducing or stopping self-harming behaviour. Try writing down what you notice about your urges to help you spot them more quickly each time they come.

2. In your notebook have a specific section where you can keep track of positive things about yourself and what you are grateful for. List your strengths and accomplishments AND list 5 things that you are grateful for everyday. Remember it can be the small things that can make an impact in your life. So, if you are grateful for something that seems insignificant write it down, because it is important to you.

3. Build your self-esteem – valuing yourself and thinking more kindly and positive about yourself can make a big difference. Replace your negative, critical thoughts about yourself with more kind and positive ones. Remember when you write in your notebook and record what you are grateful for also include things that you like about yourself and what you appreciate about yourself.

4. Understand your self-harm in more detail. Answering the following questions in your notebook can help you understand why you hurt yourself and the function that self-harm plays in your life (Smith 2016):

- How do you feel before and after you hurt yourself?
- What was the reason for hurting yourself the first time?
- What does self-harm give you now?
- What are the situations where you are most likely to want to hurt yourself?
- What are your fears about living without self-harm?
- What would you miss about self-harm?
- What else would be useful to understand about your self-harm?

It is very important to first look back before moving forward – you need to understand the reasons why you began and are continuing the behaviour.

5. Reach out to family and friends that can support you.
6. Find a good counsellor or mental health professional that can guide you.
7. Look after your general wellbeing. Looking after your body and mind is very important. Make sure that you get enough physical activity, eat nutritious meals and get enough restful sleep. Combining this with doing things that you enjoy and having a creative way of expressing your emotions and you are well on your way.
8. Practice stress management. Stress is a normal and necessary part of our daily lives. Stress is helpful in that it motivates us to accomplish tasks or to make necessary changes. But it becomes negative when an individual feels stressed more often than not and when it becomes difficult to cope. When you find yourself in this situation the effects of stress most probably will affect your physical as well as mental wellbeing.

Symptoms of stress and possible stressors (Ballestros 2009):

- Stress influences your feelings and you might experience anxiety, depression, irritability, feelings of loss of control, fear.
- Physical symptoms might include things like tense muscles, sweaty hands, sleep disturbances, rapid heart rate, weight gain or loss, indigestion, acid reflux, low energy and exhaustion.
- Other symptoms might include forgetfulness, difficulty concentrating, repetitive thoughts, crying, snapping at loved ones, jaw clenching, increased substance use.
- Stress becomes problematic when stressors accumulate and/or re-occur. This results in distress and feelings of hopelessness. Stressors can be a variety of things such as: tests, finances, health problems, friendship and romantic relationships, homework, family, grief and loss conflicts to name but a few.



To manage stress, you need to learn to relax and look after your general well-being which include staying physically and mentally healthy. Also learn to use healthy coping strategies such as exercise, time management, and balancing work and play to name but a few.

“I want to tell someone about my self-harm...”

Starting to entertain thoughts of sharing such private experiences can be very frightening. It is normal to be concerned about being judged, punished, yelled at or feeling ashamed and hurt. It is also normal to worry about hurting parents or loved ones. To help yourself take this challenging step think about the following aspects before entering the discussion:

- Think about **who** you want to tell. Telling a friend might be easier for you but take into consideration whether you want them to keep it a secret. Keeping it a secret might be very difficult as they would want to help you and need adult help to do so, or it might just be too overwhelming for them to deal with. A trusted adult (whether it is a family member, counselor, teacher) would be able to support and pull in resources to help support you.
- Also consider **where** you want to tell them. It might be less distracting if it is a quiet and more private space where you can have the discussion. This will help both you and the one you are talking to, to focus on the discussion at hand and you do not need to worry about privacy issues.
- **When** is very important. Make sure that you have enough time to talk to the individual – you do not want to only have a few minutes to discuss this – give yourself ample time. What do you want the outcome of this conversation to be? Make sure to communicate **what it is that you need** and want from the individual.

Remember that the person that you are going to disclose to will probably experience a mixture of emotions such as fear, sadness and guilt. It could be overwhelming to them and come out as anger and/or shock – so be prepared for the possibility of this. But remember it is the secondary emotion – give them some time to work through their own feelings. Remember that their experience of fear and sadness (even if expressed as anger initially) shows that they do care about you and the struggles that

you are facing.

Sleep and self-harm

There is growing evidence that sleep problems can create a greater risk for self-harm as it has a negative effect on emotion regulation. It is very important to make sure that you get enough undisturbed sleep during the night. Adolescents need between 8-10 hours sleep a night. But because during the teenage years melatonin is created later

at night it affects your circadian rhythm and you will go to bed later and get up later in the morning. Make sure that you adjust your routine and sleep environment, as well as nutrition accordingly, to help support you to get a better night's sleep. There is lots of great information on the internet on how to support yourself to get better sleep, so go have a look and see what works for you.

"I am ready to start the road to recovery but therapy/counselling seems so scary!"

Don't be afraid to seek help for yourself. Getting counselling or therapy doesn't mean that you are crazy – it means you are smart enough to know when you could use some extra support. Meeting with a therapist or counsellor on a regular basis is very helpful in understanding your emotions and finding healthier ways to deal with them. Here are some myths about therapy and counseling:

- It is not just crazy people who seek the help and support of counselling or therapy. Life is stressful and the average Joe can benefit greatly from the process. Counsellors or therapists have been trained to understand human feelings and behaviours and they are valuable to someone who needs to make sense out of difficult situation, circumstances and feelings. Counseling or therapy is not for weak people, but for someone who is searching for better understanding and want to change their negative coping strategies.
- Because a counsellor does not know you they do not have a personal agenda or biases towards you and can bring a new perspective to your challenges. Sometimes all we need is someone that is not part of the situation to stand from the outside looking in to get a better perspective. w
- Remember that just like you have your own personal way of doing things each counsellor has their way of counseling. It is important to find the right counsellor for you. In the first session have a discussion and see how you feel. Remember you need to be able to feel safe in order to share your thoughts and feelings. After the first session assess whether you think you will be able to build a therapeutic relationship with the person that you just met. If not do not be discouraged and do not think that you are not worth it. Do a bit of research and seek help until you find someone that you feel comfortable with.
- Counselling or therapy will not cure you. It is only helpful when the person going to this becomes ready and willing for it to be helpful. It provides an opportunity for you to gain more insight and develop skills that will help you to face the difficulties that brought you there in the first place. It also gives you insight and skills that you can take with you for the rest of your life and apply in

other similar difficult situations.

Artful Insight

Battle Scars

A poem by: Angela Mcrimmon

You may see my scars but you cannot see,
That each one tells a story for me,
A story where I literally fought to survive,
Yet so many times I could have died.
They ask me the triggers and all I can say,
Is that sometimes it helps me get through the day.
Sometimes it helps to make me feel calm,
To quiet my head so that I can...
Present to the world what they want to see,
So I can hide this madness inside of me.
I hide the thoughts that race round my head,
That sometimes I wish I would rather be dead.
I harm because I hurt inside,
My heart and my head seem to collide,
I'm anxious but I feel I cannot say,
Because no-one expects me to be this way.
They don't know these wounds I gave to myself,
It was easier to hurt than to ask for help,
These scars tell a story and the story is this,
They're a sign I survived and IT IS WHAT IT IS



Information for parents or caregivers working with people that self-harm

Self-harm

Self-harm is often used as a way of trying to manage emotions. It serves a purpose in that it gives your child short term relief from the emotional pain that they are feeling. Stopping or reducing self-harming behaviour can take a long time. They need to learn new and more effective ways of coping with difficult life circumstances and emotions. There is no quick-fix and it can be a slow process.

Remember that self-harm is a sign that something is seriously wrong as self-harm is a reaction to intense emotional pain. In order to stop self-harming your child needs to deal with the life circumstances that are causing the behaviour.

It is a serious problem and should be addressed as soon as it becomes evident. Ignoring it will not make it go away and it is not just a phase that they will grow out of.

Depending on the method used it could lead to physical damage and scars. It is also linked to other serious problems such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders or drug and alcohol use for which specific treatment may be required. Because there is always the risk that self-harm may result in accidental death it is very important to never give up on your child!

Discovering that your child is self-harming can be very upsetting and stressful.

How would I know?

Youth who self-harm do so mostly in secrecy. It is part of normal development for adolescents to become more secretive and independent, but when they start pulling away for long periods of time on a physical and emotional level it is a cause for concern. If you suspect that your child might be self-harming the following signs may be indicative there of:

- Hidden razors, knives, sharp objects and rubber bands. Rubber bands are used to increase the blood flow or to numb the area.
- Cut or burn marks on their arms, legs and/or abdomen that can not be explained, or are accompanied by flimsy excuses.
- Spending long periods of time alone in the bathroom or bedroom.
- Losing interest in activities that they used to enjoy, feeling down, depressed mood, feeling overly anxious.
- Wearing long sleeves and/or pants when it is hot. Avoiding swimming or changing clothes with others around. Please remember that youth can be very shy changing clothes with others around, so

- please be very cautious when approaching this subject.
Wearing bandages frequently.

What might I experience and feel upon discovery?

You may experience various different emotions such as anger, sadness, helplessness, shame, guilt, shock or disgust. It is very important to monitor your reaction as it can have a powerful effect on their behaviour and willingness to seek help.

What are the risk factors that make a specific youth vulnerable to self-harm?

Because youth development entails such great leaps and strides to individual development they need to be taught the tools to manage the new situations that they need to face. And because they might not always have the proper tools to deal with new, scary emotions or situations they resort to other unhealthy coping strategies. Youth that struggle with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, impulsivity, eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse could be prone to self-harm. Refer to causes/reasons for why people self-harm for more details.

How do I talk to my child?

The most important thing to remember is not to judge your child (and let them know this!) and to help them understand that you care about them and want to help and support them. Create an emotionally safe environment for your child to talk about their struggles. You could arrange to have a conversation while doing an activity that you both enjoy, like taking a walk. Remember that you also need to consider your child's privacy so this activity should be somewhere conducive of a private discussion. Show that you are prepared to listen to them and use some active listening skills.

If your child feels uncomfortable talking to you they could write you a letter, email or text message – remember this is a big and scary step for them and sometimes it is easier to communicate in written form. Or they might feel more comfortable talking to someone else – as difficult as it might be to accept, support their decision. It is important that you withhold judgement or demands at this stage. Because it is often difficult for self-harmers to discuss their feelings, offering a negative reaction to their disclosure probably will make things worse. Together

decide on the next steps and way forward, something that you both feel comfortable with.

20

What not to do in order to aggravate the situation

- Do not get angry or shout at them.
- Do not be judgemental.
- Do not attempt to punish or discipline your child for their self-harming behaviour. You need to focus on what is best for your child in this situation.
- Do not lecture them and do not put them down.
- Do not invade their privacy like going through their bedroom without their presence.
- Do not use threats or ultimatums.
- Remember you do not know how they feel so do not imply it.
- And No! they are not doing it to make you feel guilty – so do not imply it.
- Do not be afraid to approach your child.
- Do not accuse them, rather say something like: “I have been concerned about you. I see all these scars on your arms, and I suspect you are hurting yourself. I love you and care for you and would like to help you.”
- Do not take it personally if your child does not want to talk to you. They could use written communication or suggest that they talk to an adult that they trust.
- Do not expect that you will be able to fix the problem. As a parent, usually your first instinct is to offer advice and solutions, but it will be more helpful to just listen without judgement.
- Let your child guide you towards what they want or need from you. Self-harmers often have difficulty with control. If you take over and start dictating what is going to happen, it could worsen the problem.

How to listen to your child

There is something called active listening that can help you to truly hear what your child is telling you. It is called active listening because it is by no means passive. It involves listening driven by the value of empathy where you are listening to understand their world and experience from their perspective. In order to do that you need to give full attention, make positive eye contact, show an open and positive body language (don't have your arms crossed, rather slightly lean towards the individual with open gestures) and clear your mind of anything that can be distracting. You can always give a nod to indicate that you are listening and interested in what they are saying. That is hard work! Remember that when they are telling you their story you listen – afterwards you can ask questions to clarify and get a better understanding.

It is ok if they have a different point of view from your own – that is exactly why you have to listen - to understand theirs. This conversation is not about winning, but to understand their perspective and feelings. If the

conversation goes over into an argument you can always take a time out to calm down and revisit the conversation at a later stage when everyone's feelings are not as intense.

"I do not know what to say! Help!"

- It is ok to admit that you do not have all the answers. If you do not know what to say it is actually better to admit it rather than pretending that you do.
- Acknowledge your child's pain. Hug them, sit beside them, tell them that you are sorry that they are in so much pain, ask how you can help them.

Important things to remember

- Don't let self-harm become the focus of your relationship with your child.
- Show and tell them that their emotions are real and important.
- Remind them of their strengths and abilities – give examples like: "Remember the time that you had to work through... You demonstrated that you can ..."
- Reassure them that you do not think that they are a failure.
- To stop or to reduce self-harming behaviour can take a long time. Your child needs to learn new and more effective ways of coping with difficult life circumstances and emotional pain. Recovery is often a long and slow process.

Telling family and others

When you think about telling family members about your child's self-harming you need to consider their possible reactions and balance that with your child's need for support and privacy.

You and your child need to decide together whether you want to tell others and how much you want to tell others (siblings, wider family, friends)

- You can explain to siblings and close family that your child is going through a difficult time, but you do not need to give details.
- If you have other children, remember that you are also their parent and they need your love and attention too.

How can I create a protective, supportive environment for my child?

- Model ways of healthy stress management.
- Avoid over scheduling their time and support them in reviewing and making changes in their schedule.
- Remember family time is important and so is open lines of communication.
- Respect is a two-way street so respect your child's individual development.
- Set boundaries with your child to avoid that you feel guilty or that you might be manipulated by their self-harming behaviour.

- Educate yourself and learn more about self-harm.

Is self-harm an attempted suicide?

Self-harm is not an attempt to suicide. It is an attempt to manage emotional pain. Because self-harm could be dangerous it should never be seen as just a phase that will pass, as the method used could cause serious harm or even unintentional death. There is research to support that individuals who self-harm often have suicidal thoughts. It is therefore important to assess for suicidality. Should you suspect that they might be suicidal the first step is to ask the question: "Have you been thinking about ending your life?" or "Have you been thinking about suicide?" If the answer is yes use the acronym SLAP to assess the risk (Mcvey-Noble 2006):

S – Specificity of suicide plan. Does your child have an actual thought out, specific plan or is it just an idea? That is the when, where and how? If there is a specific plan on when, where and how, the risk is higher.

L – Lethality of means. Some plans are more lethal than others. Slitting wrists, shoot-ing themselves, jumping of a building or in front of a vehicle or hanging is much more lethal than "I don't know, I will hold my breath until I run out of air. Take all suicidal ideation serious, but act quickly if your child has a clear and dangerous means in mind.

A – Availability of means. Ask if they have access to the intended means for their suicide. If your child stated that he/she is going to shoot themselves and you have a gun in the house the risk is extremely high. Remove the means immediately and take them to the ER or call 911.

P – Proximity of help. Evaluate the availability of helping resources. If your child has a therapist a phone call away and supporting family and friends vs it is 4 am and your child's counselor is on vacation and he/she does not want to talk to the on call therapist.

Safety and supportive factors to keep in mind if you take your child to the emergency room

- If you decide to drive your child to the ER ask at least one adult to go with you in the car. If you are driving they can support your child and attend to him/her while you are focused on getting there safely. It will also provide moral and physical support. The closer you get to the hospital and the more real the decision gets there is always a chance that your child might want to escape.
- If you are not feeling strong enough to drive, ask someone to take you or call a taxi and go with your child to the ER.
- If your child refuses to go to the ER and you feel that his/her judgement

is compromised or he/she is actively engaging in suicidal gestures or attempts, call 911.

Is it not just attention-seeking behaviour or a phase that will pass?

It might be perceived as attention seeking but is more a cry for help than anything else. And it is not a phase that will pass. They are not going to wake up one day with the skills to manage their emotional pain in a healthy way – it is hard work gaining and developing those skills – they do not develop over night.

Taking care of yourself

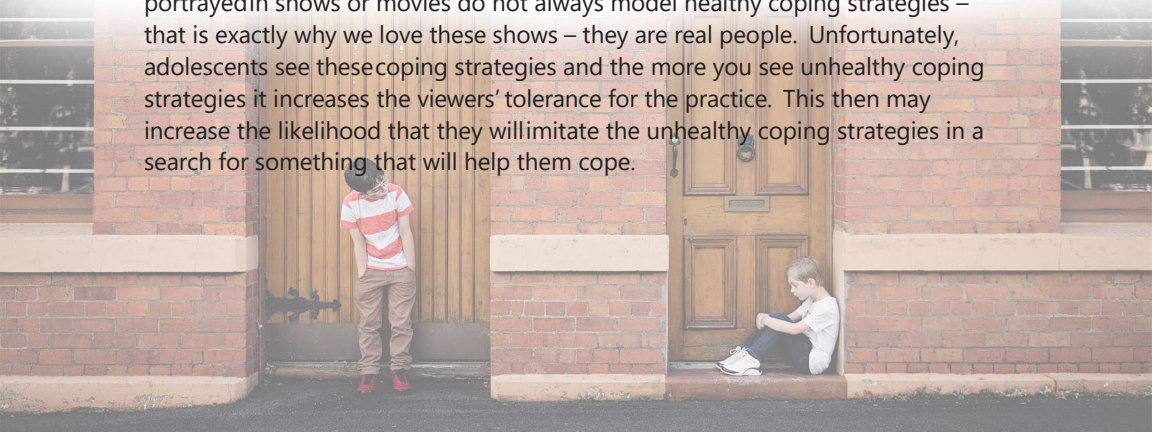
It is normal for parents to experience strong emotions, and just as it is important for your child that self-harms to find healthier coping strategies, you also need to manage your emotions effectively. Be aware of physical signs of stress and make time to do things that you enjoy. Make sure you get enough sleep, eat healthy and accept help from others.

Why does media play such an important role in adolescents lives and how does it impact self-harm?

Adolescents engage in media so excessively for some of the following reasons:

- It is an important way for them to learn more about their society and peers.
- Media allows them to experiment with different social roles and personalities.
- They also turn to media for help with their problems and issues that they may feel uncomfortable discussing with someone.

Media does not cause behaviours but plays an important role in spreading ideas and normalising unusual or rare behaviour. We must remember that characters portrayed in shows or movies do not always model healthy coping strategies – that is exactly why we love these shows – they are real people. Unfortunately, adolescents see these coping strategies and the more you see unhealthy coping strategies it increases the viewers' tolerance for the practice. This then may increase the likelihood that they will imitate the unhealthy coping strategies in a search for something that will help them cope.



Internet use and self-harm

The part that internet use plays within self-harm is not fully understood. We know that internet use has significantly increased within the last two decades and that websites and forums containing information on self-harm is readily available and accessible. We can choose to either ignore this or to educate ourselves in what is more safe websites and how to use it to our advantage.

Some of the **negative influences** of some less moderated websites can include:

- Normalization of self-harm.
- How to conceal scars.
- Self-harm techniques.
- Negative attitudes toward disclosure.
- Users might experience cyber-bullying which could increase rates of self-harm.

Some of the **positive influences** of some strictly moderated more supporting websites can include:

- Access to supporting communities/groups for individuals who do not have the resources within their community.
- Opportunity to create a connection with others who also struggle with self-harm. An opportunity to receive but also give empathy and support.
- Used as part of a coping mechanism.
- Support for reinforcement of positive behaviours.
- Participants can gain more knowledge regarding self-harm, which can better their understanding and management of self-harm.

Information for friends of youth that self-harm

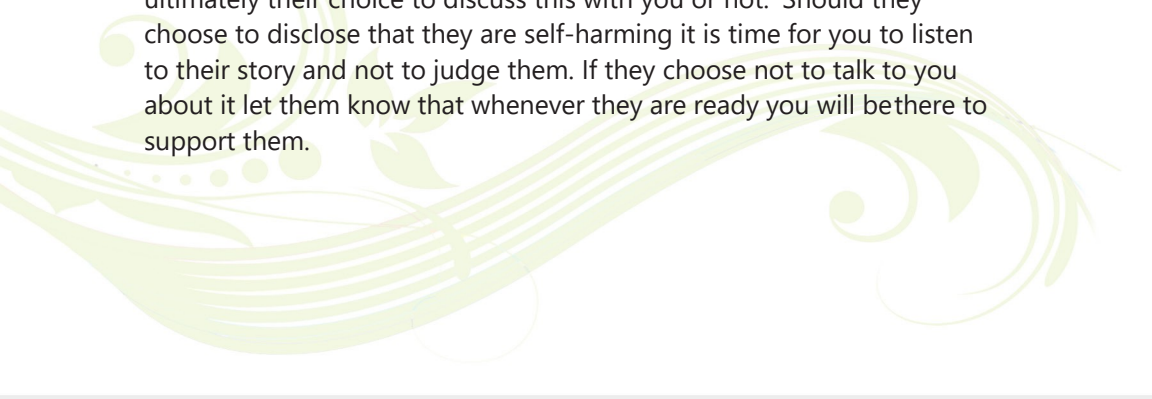
"How can I help my friend that self-harms?"

Learning that a friend hurts him or herself intentionally can be frightening, stressful and frustrating. You likely want to help, but it's hard to know what to do, what to say and where to turn for help. Below are some questions commonly asked by the friends of people who self-harm and answers that could help you figure out how best to help your friend.

"I think my friend may be self-harming. What now?"

Don't be afraid to talk to your friend about it. There are studies that show that people who self-harm wish that someone would raise the subject even though it is uncomfortable. You may be instrumental in helping your friend get the help that they need. Ignoring it won't help and they will not stop the behaviour until they find the right help.

If you think that your friend might be self-harming and you want to discuss it with them you need to remember to choose the right time and place. Make sure it is a more private space and you have time to talk (don't ask in the school hallway on your way to your next class). Remember to be gentle, respectful and supportive. Tell them that you care about them and are worried about them. Remember, it is ultimately their choice to discuss this with you or not. Should they choose to disclose that they are self-harming it is time for you to listen to their story and not to judge them. If they choose not to talk to you about it let them know that whenever they are ready you will be there to support them.



What should I say or do (or avoid saying or doing) if I discover my friend is self-harming?

- The most important thing is to **take it seriously**. Even if your friend tries to downplay the problem, or brush it off as no big deal, remember that self-harm is a sign that someone is in deep emotional pain.
- Remember it **took great courage for them** to share this with you, recognize this verbally towards them.
- Remain calm, it will only make things worse if you get into a confrontation or set ultimatums. It will probably be very difficult to hear that someone you care about is hurting themselves and it is normal to have feelings of anger, shock, disgust, fear and other negative emotions. But all they want is for you to **really listen to them** and not judge them.
- Let them tell their story and try and **see their situation from their perspective**. It truly helps making sense of something that you don't understand by seeing it from someone else's perspective.
- **Don't promise to keep secrets** about their self-harm. It could put you in a difficult position. Let them know that it is difficult for you to do and that it is much more important for them to seek help.
- **Learn about self-harm**. The more you know about the subject, the easier it will be to understand what your friend is going through and how you can help.
- **Encourage them to seek professional help**. They will not stop harming until they are better able to deal with the pain in their lives.
- Always **support your friend's positive steps and choices**. If they do anything to get help or on the road to recovery, positively reinforce it.
- If you are ever worried about your friend's safety it is ok to ask for help from someone else. **Their safety is more important than privacy or anger toward you**.
- Recovering from self-harm takes a long time, so be patient and supportive.
- **Don't let** them sharing their **self-harm change your interactions**. That will only support them in not seeking help.

"I feel overwhelmed by my friend's self-harm and I just don't know how to deal with it..."

The act of self-harm does not affect only your friend but other people as well. It is a serious and very stressful subject to deal with and it is normal to feel overwhelmed.

It is important to learn your own limitations and to look after yourself accordingly. Don't neglect your own needs because if you are burnt out you won't be of any good use to your friend. If you feel you need to take a break explain to your friend that you want to be able to help them in the best way possible and that is why you need to care for yourself right now. Wanting to take a break does not mean that you are a bad and unsupportive friend.

Most important to remember – IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT

Information for teachers

What is my responsibility as a teacher in dealing with self-harming students?

The first step would be to check with your school to see if there is a policy or protocol in place on how to deal with self-harming students. There are times when a teacher, in the best interests of the student concerned, cannot and should not guarantee confidentiality. While most self-harm is non-life threatening, and students should not be forced to seek help against their will, there are certain circumstances when you must break confidentiality. These include:

- If an injury is serious, or an overdose has been taken
- If you believe them to be at severe risk to themselves or others

Students who self-harm require professional, emotional and sometimes medical attention. It is not your responsibility as a teacher to counsel the student or to provide treatment. However, as a teacher you have a significant presence in their life. Simply being available to talk to a student when they need it can make a big difference, as feelings of isolation are often part of the problem.



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Resources

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www.headspace.org.au
<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu>
[u/www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)
<http://www.themix.org.uk/>

Any Questions?

For more information on self-harm, please contact
Some Other Solutions at 780-743-8605.



Some Other Solutions is a non-profit or- ganization in Fort McMurray, Alberta, and their mission is to empower individuals to overcome life's challenges and build their capacity to support others. To achieve this mission, Some Other Solutions offers three core programs:

- Health & Wellness - Information & Referral - Child & Youth

Some Other Solutions also provides a 24 Hour Crisis Line that is completely confidential, and aims to provide support for those faced with immediate concern.

24 Hour Crisis Line
780-743-HELP (4357)
1-800-565-3801

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