



Self-Harming Behaviors: How You Can Help Your Child

Perhaps one of our greatest instincts as parents is to protect our children from harm. That's why it can be particularly disturbing when you discover your child is self-harming. What could possibly cause a child to intentionally hurt themselves? More importantly, is there anything you can do to prevent it from happening?

Self-harming is defined as deliberately injuring oneself *without* suicidal intent. Most commonly it involves self-cutting, but can also include behaviors such as burning, scratching, and hitting oneself to the point of injury. So, why would anyone hurt themselves on purpose?

There are a variety of reasons why a youth might self-harm. Self-harming is often a way of providing relief from interpersonal problems, unpleasant thoughts, and overwhelmingly painful emotions. Youth who self-harm often have a negative self-image. For some, it can induce a positive emotional state similar to cocaine and other drugs that release endorphins to create good feelings. For others self-harming can be a pain killer. With the injury, the internal pain shifts to external pain, which is often more bearable. Like cocaine and other "pain killers," self-harming often becomes addictive, as well.



Although there is extensive research on self-harm and suicide, very little of it focuses specifically on youth in care and youth who have been adopted. What we do know is that self-harming behaviors are most commonly seen among pre-teens and teenagers who

have experienced trauma. It logically follows that our children may be at higher risk for self-harming. And while most adolescents struggle with identity issues, adoption adds layers of complexity to this already difficult stage of development. This can be a particularly

painful period for the child who has been adopted and he or she may turn to self-harm as a way of coping with (or avoiding) the feelings that arise.

While some psychologists report there's been an increase in self-harming behaviors as kids have become more aware of it through movies and other media (some may try it as "novelty"), it is youth who are carrying deep emotional pain who are at risk for becoming addicted to the relief or rush it can provide.

There was a time when it was suspected that these behaviors were "merely a cry for help," but that doesn't hold true when you consider the great lengths so many adolescents go to in order to hide it.

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Cutting or burning is often done in places on the body where the injuries cannot be seen. Cutting on the inner thigh is common among girls. With boys, it can look more like punching a wall with an intent to cause injury. As a result, the underlying emotional issues may be seen as anger rather than hurt.

The addictive element of self-harming can make it particularly difficult for both parents and youth themselves to identify triggers. True enough, events such as a break up or bullying can certainly add to the deep emotional pain that a youth seeks to relieve, but addictive behaviors don't necessarily require an obvious trigger. Your child's overall emotional state may be your best indicator that he or she is at risk to self-harm. So what should parents look for if they suspect their child may be self-harming?

Warning Signs and Risk Factors

Early intervention can help prevent the behavior from becoming a habit. As your child's parent, you're the first line of defense. Here are a few things to look for:

- Small linear cuts, sometimes spelling words
- Frequent unexplained cuts or scratches
- Long sleeves in hot weather
- Missing razor blades or finding razor blades in child's room
- Youth is withdrawn, avoids interacting with you
- Changes in mood, communication, school performance
- Anxiety or depression
- Eating disorders



What Parents Can Do

One of your best defenses is having an open and honest relationship with your child so they have healthy ways of expressing and coping with pain. Of course this is easier said than done, especially with preteens, teens, and kids who have suffered trauma. But there are some steps you might take that can help.

- **Try not to overreact.** Doing so may cause guilt and shame that could make the situation worse.
- **Seek the professional help of a therapist or psychologist.** A trained professional, particularly one who specializes in self-harm, can help identify and address the underlying issues.
- **Acknowledge the pain and provide emotional support.** Talk about it in a way that is supportive and understanding so your child will feel safe sharing with you. "I see you're really hurting. I'm here to help. Let's work through this together." Focusing on the emotional pain your child is experiencing helps him or her to feel understood and less isolated.
- **Model healthy coping behaviors and offer alternatives for releasing pain and anxiety** (e.g., physical activity that will help release endorphins). Crank up the radio and dance to exhaustion. Scream into a pillow until you can't scream any more. Run as fast as you can for as far as you can. Punch the daylight out of a pillow or

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couch cushion.

- **Ask your child what kinds of things make him or her happy.** Are there activities or hobbies your child is passionate about that you can encourage as an outlet or a way of creating pleasurable feelings (e.g., dance classes, soccer, theater club, drawing)? Show an interest in his or her interests to strengthen your connection.
- **Find ways to help eliminate stressors.** Ask, “Is there anything stressing you out right now that I can help with?” Does your child have so many extracurricular activities that he or she is overwhelmed and not enjoying them? Are you monitoring her use of social media?
- **Validate, validate, validate your child’s feelings.** Actively listen and offer reassurance.

Helping your child seek out healthy alternatives to releasing pain, as well as a safe place to express their feelings, will go a long way on the road to healing.

Resources

Additional Resources

- [Why Girls Cut](#)
- [Self-harm Signs and Treatment](#)
- *Bodily Harm*, by Karen Conterio



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