

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

www.parentline.org.au



Self Harm - Adolescents

REMEMBER:

- *Self-harm is a coping behaviour*
- *It is generally not done with suicidal intent.*
- *It's important to manage your own emotions.*
- *Don't minimise your child's reasons for self-harming.*
- *Focus on providing emotional support.*
- *Self-harm a serious problem that is best managed by a mental health professional.*

Proudly managed by



Self-harm is one of the most distressing issues that parents may have to face. This info sheet provides an overview of self-harm and some tips for parents of adolescents.

What is self-harm?

- Self-harm is generally considered to be a coping strategy in response to mental distress
- It is a deliberate (rather than an accidental) act that involves harm to the body
- It is often done in secret.
- Some self-harming behaviours include cutting, picking, burning, scratching, hitting, and swallowing substances or objects.
- The extent of self-harming is hard to research because it is often done in secret and may be hidden under clothes.
- Behaviours such as tattooing and body piercing are not generally considered to be self harming behaviours in our culture.

In some adolescent sub-cultures, self-harm is more prevalent. It is important to remember that self-harm is a complex problem that requires professional treatment.

For some people it is a single event that is never repeated. For others it can become a pattern of repeated behaviour that occurs throughout their lives.

Why do young people self-harm?

It is difficult for many people to understand why someone would want to hurt or injure themselves.

Those who resort to self-harm often have poorly developed problem solving or coping skills, and difficulties in expressing or regulating their emotions.

There are many reasons why people self harm. Below are listed *some* of the more common ones:

- To provide relief from psychological pain
- To interrupt traumatic memories
- To express depression, anxiety, or anger
- To relieve emotional numbness and to feel 'real' again
- To gain a sense of control over their lives and emotional experiences
- To experiment with a new behaviour
- To belong to a group
- As an act of self punishment in response to self-blame
- As a cry for help

A young person who self-harms has not "gone crazy" but is likely to be very distressed. Self injury is nearly always a way for them to cope. It is clearly not a healthy or productive way of coping, but to some adolescents it is the only strategy they can think of at the time.

It is not helpful to think of self-harm as attention seeking. Most self-injury is hidden and a source of shame for all concerned.

Frequently parents are unaware it is happening. It is not something the young person is proud of or wants to draw attention to.

Concluding that it is just attention seeking behaviour can minimise the serious emotional pain of a young person, and may prevent them from receiving the help that they need.

Is there a link between self-harm and suicide?

People who self-harm usually do so without any intention of killing themselves. It is usually a survival strategy for coping with painful feelings. It may be destructive but it is not intended to be lethal. When questioned, the majority of young people who self-harm will state that they have no intention of killing themselves.

Self-harm and suicidal thinking can go together, and self-harming behaviour can precede a suicide attempt although there is not necessarily a link between the two..

Any young person engaging in self-harming behaviour needs to receive a thorough assessment by a mental health professional to assess their level of risk. This is not something that parents should undertake themselves.

What should parents do?

Parents frequently feel a variety of strong emotions when they discover that their child is self-harming. These include anxiety, powerlessness, alarm, repulsion and anger. It is easy to feel frustrated by what looks like irrational and destructive behaviour and simply want it to stop immediately.

Try to stay calm. Express your concern and love for the child. Self injury must be taken seriously, but at the same time try not to overreact or express a strong emotional response of anger, fear, revulsion or frustration.

Your most important response as a parent should be to seek out a mental health service with expertise in dealing with this area. Your general practitioner is a good starting point to find this type of help. Alternatively you can contact the child and adolescent team within your local area health service.

Self-harm is usually a complex issue. Frequently adolescents do not want high levels of parental involvement in their life – which they might view as intrusive. At the same time most parents desperately want to help their son or daughter.

It can be very unpleasant to be stuck in the middle of these two forces – your adolescent keeping you at a distance and your concern as a parent, wanting to do everything you can to help.

In extreme situations where a serious injury has occurred dialling for an ambulance or attending the Emergency Department of your local hospital will be necessary.

Keep life balanced.

Don't let this symptom of your child's distress become your focus, or let your family life become centred on this issue. Try and keep your routines and relationships as normal as possible.

Focus on providing emotional support.

Focus on expressing your love and support. Try to remain engaged with your adolescent when things are going well, not only at times when they are self-harming.

Showing understanding is not encouraging the behaviour. Being judgemental and angry will make the situation worse, as will punishing them for this behaviour.

Ensure you do not give them the impression that you think they are crazy.

What will a mental health worker do?

The mental health worker will undertake a risk assessment to work out if the young person is suicidal or in danger of seriously injuring themselves.

Once they have made sure that the young person is as safe as possible they will then assess the meaning or purpose of the self injuring behaviour.

They may also help the young person to learn skills in how to express and regulate their emotions safely and healthily, and to replace the destructive behaviours with more helpful behaviour.

Manage your emotions.

Try to avoid expressing your anger and frustration about the self-harm as it is far more likely to cause further self-harm than to stop it.

Your anger will cause further distress that may mean that they are more likely to use the coping method of self-injury.

Avoid power struggles.

No matter how strongly you feel you cannot control an adolescent's personal behaviour. Getting your son or daughter to promise that they will not do it again is unlikely to be effective and may create further pressure and secretiveness about the behaviour.

Respect their privacy.

It can be difficult to balance the need to monitor self-harming behaviour and respecting your child's privacy. Don't try to force them to reveal their most private thoughts because they might not be ready or able to do so.

It will probably not be helpful to try to get them to explain their reasons for self-harm; there is a good chance that they might not be able to explain why.

If they don't want to talk, don't try to force them. Just be there for them and let them know that you are there when they want to talk.

Don't minimise.

If they discuss their source of grief or upset, don't minimise it. A fight with a peer might be a big issue for an adolescent.

It is important for parents to listen, let the child know they have been heard and not make them feel criticised or judged about the issues that concern them.

Look for patterns.

It might be helpful to keep a brief diary of the young person's self-harm. You may be able to work out times or events that increase the risk of it happening.

Look for themes as this may give you some clues as to what might be happening for them and when they are at their most vulnerable.

Maintain wellbeing.

Encourage any activity or hobby that your child enjoys. Try and help them maintain their regular interests.

Reducing stress can reduce the drive towards self-harm. Exercise, social contact, and hobbies are generally effective stress reduction strategies.

Support their recovery.

If your adolescent has a Crisis Plan to implement during periods of severe stress, gently support its use.

www.headspace.org.au

Headspace is a youth-friendly source of mental health support for young people. They have centres across Australia.

www.reachout.com

You could also encourage the young person to visit the ReachOut website which has been designed to help young people with mental health issues

www.kidshelpline.com.au

Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) is a free, 24 hour telephone counselling service for children and young people, available across Australia.