

A Guide for Parents on Self-Harm

What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves on purpose as a way of trying to manage distressing or overwhelming feelings and experiences. Someone who is self-harming might be dealing with a lot of intense thoughts and feelings, and hurting themselves may feel like the only way to cope. Some may feel numb and hurt themselves in order to feel something.

If your child is self-harming, or you're concerned they might be, it can be incredibly worrying and upsetting for you as their parent. The important thing to remember is that you and your child are not alone, lots of people go through this and come out the other side with different ways of coping with their feelings.

Signs of Self-Harm

If you're worried that your child is self-harming but they aren't talking to you about it or showing visible injuries, it can be difficult to know what's going on.

Examples of self-harm include:

- cutting themselves
- scratching skin with fingernails
- burning skin
- biting skin
- hitting themselves, or banging their head or another part of their body on a wall
- pulling hair out from their head, eyebrows or eyelashes
- inserting objects into their body

If you are worried your child may be self-harming, here are some things to look out for:

- unexplained cuts, burns, bite marks, bruises or bald patches
- keeping themselves covered, for example wearing long sleeves even during hot weather, not wanting to change clothes around others or avoiding activities like swimming
- bloody tissues in waste bins
- seeming low or depressed, for example withdrawing from friends and family
- blaming themselves for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness or hopelessness
- outbursts of anger or argumentativeness

Why Do People Self-Harm?

Self-harm is usually a way of trying to manage very difficult feelings. People often self-harm when life feels hard to cope. In the moment, the sensation of self-harming and experiencing some physical pain can feel easier than feeling out of control emotionally. If a person is self-harming, it's often a sign that something in their life isn't quite right or has become too much to deal with. It can be understood as an important message about how a person is feeling, one that needs to be noticed with care by the adults around them.

Some myths you might hear about self-harm can make it harder to talk about as a parent, including that it's a 'phase' young people go through, or that it's an attention-seeking behavior. While it might feel hard to understand sometimes from the outside. Self-harm can be a way for a person to:

- manage, reduce or express very strong and upsetting emotions; such as hurt, sadness, anger, fear or feeling bad about themselves
- relieve tension and pressure, or reduce feelings of panic and anxiety and temporarily feel calmer
- experience a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- gain a sense of control over feelings or problems
- stop feeling numb or 'zoned-out'. Which can be a protection mechanism our bodies use when we're experiencing overwhelming feelings

However, while it often feels like self-harm brings some relief in the moment, this is only temporary. As feelings build up again, so does the urge to self-harm. As this cycle continues over time, a person may start to feel ashamed, confused or frightened about the fact that they're self-harming. This can become a cycle that's really hard to break and a habit that's hard to stop.

Helping Your Child in the Short Term

Over the longer-term, becoming more aware of how they feel when they self-harm, what's making them feel this way and what kinds of things help, will empower your child to feel more in control. This will hopefully reduce the sense of being overwhelmed and the feeling that they need to self-harm. When the urge to self-harm does build in the moment, having a list of other things they can do straight away can also help your child to 'ride the wave of' their intense feelings without self-harming.

Remember that different things will work for different people and that what helps will usually depend on the feelings your child is trying to manage. Talk to your child about different strategies they could try while also giving them space to find their own ways of coping and figure out what works for them.

Examples of strategies could include:

- Making and using a self soothe box
- Writing down how they're feeling in a journal
- Writing down difficult feelings on pieces of paper and then ripping them up
- Ripping up a magazine or newspaper

- Hitting a soft cushion, pillow or bean bag
- Listening to loud music
- Taking a shower
- Exercise
- Deep Breathing
- Wrapping up in a blanket
- Talking to someone (friend, family member or calling a helpline)
- Cleaning or organizing something
- Doing a hobby they enjoy that helps them feel calm (painting, drawing, coloring, favorite TV program, video games, baking, etc.)

Helping Your Child Long Term

Try to open a conversation about what's going on

It might help to start a conversation while walking outside or doing an activity to help your child to feel more relaxed and make it feel less like a 'big chat'. It can also help both of you to be in a neutral space, for example not in their bedroom. While you may understandably have lots of questions, it's important to remember your child is going through a tough time and may find this overwhelming. Focus on finding out how they're doing, without bombarding them for information.

Keep communication as open as you can

Remember that your child may feel ashamed about self-harming and find it difficult to talk about. Let them come to you when they feel ready to talk and reassure them that they can talk to you as often and for as long as they need to. If your child is struggling to talk, they might find it easier to text you or write you a letter. This also gives you time to process what they've told you and think about how you'd like to respond.

Stay calm and non-judgmental

When your child does open up, try to focus on listening, showing empathy and being curious about what it's like for them, rather than trying to 'fix' things straightaway. Sometimes they will just want you to listen and understand how they are feeling.

Think together about what's causing them to self-harm

Self-harm is a way of coping and is usually a symptom of something else that's going on. Are there things such as a relationship or experiences at home/school, that are making them feel worried, frightened, upset or angry? Are there changes that can be made to make these things better? Taking pressures away can help to reduce the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Help them notice when the urge to self-harm builds and how they're feeling when that happens

What kinds of thoughts are they having, and how do they feel in their bodies? This can help them to recognize what feelings they're trying to cope with and what they can do instead to express

and manage these. Keeping a mood diary might help them to understand this overtime. This could be as simple as a word, phrase or emoji that they note down each day.

Spend quality time together doing activities they enjoy

Even if it's just for a little while, doing something fun can give your child a break and help them relax. This might be drawing, making something, playing a sport, cooking or watching a favorite movie together.

Help them do daily things that support their wellbeing

This includes getting up at a regular time, eating regular healthy meals, exercising, drinking water, spending quality time with loved ones and getting enough sleep. It might help to think about limits around screen time as part of this.

Keep an eye on your child without making them feel policed.

It's completely natural that when you find out your child is self-harming, you may want to watch over them or know what they're doing all the time. While it's a good idea to monitor the situation and check in with them, sensing that they're being watched may increase their feelings of anxiety and guilt. When it feels possible and they need it, give them some space.

Seek professional help or advice.

While there are lots of things you can do to help your child, lots of people in this situation will need professional help to shift the situation and feel better.

Finding Professional Help

There are different places where you can find help for your child. Speaking to your General Practitioner is often a good place to start, as they can discuss your concerns, speak to your child to find out how they're doing and let you know what support options are available. Sometimes your child's school may have staff members such as a Licensed Counselor or Social Worker that can provide resources to get you started with a professional.

Some people who are self-harming will find it very difficult to speak to a professional, go to appointments or even acknowledge what's going on. If things are feeling stuck, some parents have found the following things helpful to keep in mind when seeking professional help:

- If you're feeling under a lot of strain yourself, or that the situation is too much to manage as a parent, it's often a sign that more professional help is needed.
- Try to speak to professionals early on, before things have escalated to a crisis situation.
- Encourage your child to give themselves some time to get to know a professional and build trust, remembering that they might be starting from a very withdrawn place.
- Ask if you can see the same professional each time, so that you and your child don't have to keep re-explaining the situation.

- Be open minded about different types of treatment, remembering that what works for your child might not be the same as what would work for you.

Looking After Yourself

Finding out that your child is self-harming can be an incredibly distressing, or even traumatic, experience as a parent. It's completely normal to struggle with feelings of anxiety, confusion, sadness, anger, frustration, guilt or shame. Try to take time when you can to check in with yourself, think about ways you can take care of yourself as well as your child. Remember that it's okay to ask for help when you need it, and to share your worries with someone you trust.

If you need more help, speaking to your General Practitioner is a good place to start, and they may be able to refer you to a local support service. Sometimes it helps just having someone there who can listen to what you're going through.

For Help Call: Maricopa County Crisis Response Network (602) 222-9444

For Emergencies Call: 911

For Assistance and Support during School Hours:

Jessica Fisher, LCSW

Vista Peak Clinical Social Worker

(623) 445-3900