

Self-harm and self-injury

Knowing that someone you love is hurting themselves can be frightening. It can be hard to understand and often your immediate reaction is to want it to stop. But giving up self-harm is not always that simple. It can take time for young people to learn the skills they need to stop self-harming. Fortunately there are lots of things you can do to help them through this process.

What is self-harm and self-injury?

Self-harm refers to people deliberately hurting their bodies. There are many different types of self-harm including burning, punching and picking skin or sores. However, the most common is cutting. Self-harm is usually done in secret and on places of the body that may not be noticeable to others.

Who is self-harming?

There are many people who self-harm; people of all ages, backgrounds, cultures and experiences.

Per cent of young people who have self-harmed at some point in their life ¹	12 per cent
Average age for first trying self-harm ¹	12-14 years

Since the year 2000 there has been a steady increase in young women (aged 15-24) who have needed medical attention because of the level of their self-injury.²

Why do people self-harm?

For many young people self-harm is about coping. It is a way that they can feel relief, or control their stress or intense emotional pain. They may feel alone, numb, hopeless, overwhelmed, desperate or angry. Some young people describe the physical pain as something that 'grounds' them. It helps to take their focus away from the emotional turmoil that triggered the self-harm.

For some young people self-harm is how they express their need for help, while for others it may be in response to guilt or a symptom of their anxiety or depression.

However, the relief that they experience is only short term and at some point the difficult feelings return. It can be hard to break this cycle if they do not have any other ways to cope.

Some of the common triggers for self-harm include difficulties in relationships with friends or family, problems at work or school, bullying, low self-esteem, sexual difficulties, anxiety and/or depression and alcohol and drug abuse.

Signs that someone is self-harming

Self-harm is not always easy to spot. You might notice changes in a young person's mood, what they do with their time or who they socialise with. Or you might notice scratches and cuts that the young person is unable to explain.

The only way to really understand what is happening for a young person is to talk with them about it.

Talking about it

Talking about your concerns can be difficult at first. It helps if the conversation is private, in a comfortable setting and not when other major events or stresses have just taken place.

Begin by talking about why you are worried, what you have noticed and ask directly about self-harm. If they are hurting themselves, try to get a picture of why they self-harm, how often and what they do. You can then begin to understand what they are feeling and thinking, what triggers their self-harm and how you might be able to help them.

It's ok to admit that you don't have all the answers. Let them know that you are there to support them, that you are prepared to talk and work with them on getting the help they need, no matter what.

If the young person doesn't want to talk to you about what's going on, don't take it personally. Let them know you are ready to listen whenever they want to talk, or offer other ideas about who they could confide in – family or friends, school counsellor, their doctor or the *beyondblue* Support Service.

How you might react

When you learn that a young person is self-harming you might react in a range of ways – with disbelief, denial, anger, fear, helplessness and/or guilt.

The intensity of your reaction might even give you some insight into how the young person feels sometimes.

It will be important for you to work through how you feel (you may need to talk with others about it) but what is helpful to the young person at that moment is to focus on what they need.

Knowing what to expect

As much as you want to, you cannot change things for them. You can, however, support them to better understand how they feel and why, build positive coping skills, improve their general wellbeing and help them through when they experience setbacks.

Talk to them about how they want you to help. What types of things do they want to talk with you about? Who will they talk to about their self-harm?

Sometimes young people prefer parents to support their general health and help with the practical parts of life such as getting to appointments or sport; leaving the more personal conversations to times with a health professional.

Support and encourage the young person to do things that help their general health and wellbeing, such as:

- eat well, sleep and exercise
- limit drug and alcohol use
- create a positive home/school/work environment
- spend time with supportive family and friends
- do things each day that are meaningful
- feel empowered to make decisions
- manage stress with exercise, meditation, yoga
- talk and get involved in other aspects of the young person's life – make sure the focus of your communication is not always on their self-harm.

Promote the use of their problem solving skills

- Help them identify the problem
- Explore some options about how they could approach it – you might suggest some solutions and they generate their own. Talk with them about the pros and cons of each solution.
- Encourage them to implement their chosen solution, reminding them that if that is not successful there are other options.

Try to replace the self-harm

Replacing self-harm with something less harmful works for some people. Encourage the young person to try a few of these to see if they work for them:

- wait 15 minutes before self-harming
- hold ice cubes in their hand – cold causes pain but is not dangerous to their health
- wear rubber bands on their wrist to flick themselves when they feel like hurting themselves
- use a red pen to draw on the areas they might normally cut
- work it off with exercise, do something they enjoy
- eat a chilli
- take a deep breath and count to 10 or try deep breathing and relaxation exercises
- try to focus on something around them, something simple, watch it for a while and see if that can distract them from the negative thoughts
- talk to someone
- write in a journal, draw or express feelings in another way.

Help to spot the better moments

It's easy to notice the things that don't work or that go wrong. By noticing the better times, even if they might be only short, you begin to get some clues on what helps to keep the young person from self-harming.

Gently point out these 'better moments'. Consider how you can help the young person experience more of these 'better moments'.

Questions to ask yourself:

- When does self-harm NOT happen?
- What is going on when they are not self-harming?
- Who are they with, what are they doing?

Help them stay safe

Seek medical attention

- Encourage the young person to care for their wounds appropriately; clean and bandage them where required.
- Understand your limits. It is possible that the person's safety is at risk from their self-harm so there may be times when you need to call in others to help (doctor, health service, crisis services). This may not be what the young person wants initially but the priority has to be their safety.
- If you need to call in help from others, try to speak to the young person first about what is happening. You can then encourage them to make some decisions about seeking help.

Ask about suicide

For most young people self-harm is a coping mechanism, not a suicide attempt.³ There is, however, a risk that a person may accidentally hurt themselves more than they planned. The risk of accidental suicide is higher in people who self-harm. People who repeatedly self-harm may also begin to feel as though they cannot stop, and this may lead to feeling trapped, hopeless and suicidal.

Asking about suicide helps you to understand the risks. It does not create extra stress but in fact gives them a chance to talk openly about it. Ask about whether this is something they have thought about, what they had in mind and importantly, how they think you could help. If you find that they are feeling suicidal sit with them and seek advice from **beyondblue Support Service, Lifeline** or **Kids Helpline**.

Finding the right support

Health professionals work with the young person to build a relationship of trust and care. They help the young person to become more aware of what they are doing, why and importantly, how they might begin to cope in new and healthier ways. This might take a few sessions or it might take longer. If other support is needed the health professional can arrange this too.

Many young people are reluctant to seek support. Some worry about their privacy, others feel embarrassed, while some have had a previous bad experience with a health professional. It is important to talk through their concerns, providing information where you can, and encouraging them to give it a try. Talk with them about the options for help available and perhaps offer to help them make contact with a health service, or attend the first appointment if that helps them feel reassured.

There are many different approaches that health professionals use to help young people. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, Dialectical Behavioural Therapy, Mindfulness and Problem Solving Therapy are all approaches that have shown to be beneficial to young people who self-harm.

It can help if young people understand that they might have to talk about difficult things sometimes; but that's part of them learning new ways to cope. The health professional's role is to support them through this process.

You can find a health professional online, by phone or in person. It can help to talk with the health service over the phone about what to expect on their first visit/conversation. This often helps to put young people at ease.

Look after yourself and your family

- Caring for someone who self-harms can be exhausting, emotionally and physically. Maintaining your own health means you are more able to support the young person; keep fit and healthy, get enough sleep and do things that you enjoy.
- Consider how you are feeling and how you respond to the young person. Approaching the young person in a calm and thoughtful manner gets the best results.
- Create your own support network. It might include friends, family, or perhaps a family support group. Consider whether you need to get some advice and support for yourself.
- Encourage others in the family to talk about their concerns. Reassure them that you are aware of their concerns and that you are doing your best to help the young person.

When it comes to self-harm it is important to focus on what drives a young person to hurt themselves. The goal is to support a young person to learn how to manage their emotions, and decrease their urge to harm themselves. While you wait, keeping them safe, being patient, showing your love and respect and maintaining hope are all important.

References

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- ² Pointer, S. (2013). Trends in hospitalised injury, Australia: 1999-00 to 2010-11. Injury research and statistics series 86. Cat. no. INJCAT 162. Canberra: AIHW. [online] Retrieved from: <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=60129544399> [Accessed: 13 Feb 2014].
- ³ Klonsky, E. D. (2007). The functions of deliberate self-injury: a review of the evidence. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 27 (2), pp. 226-239.

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

 1300 22 4636

 Email or  chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

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