March: Self-Harm Awareness Month

While self-harm is a common predictor for suicidal ideation and behavior, not every person who self-harms is considering suicide. Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) refers to intentionally harming oneself without suicidal intent. Skin scratching, cutting, burning, and self-battery are among the most common methods of NSSI. While an individual may employ NSSI for various reasons, the most common reasons are as a coping mechanism for emotional pain, to inflict punishment, or simply to feel something (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). NSSI can be a difficult behavior to identify, and supporting students who employ NSSI requires work from various adults in their lives.

Learning one’s child is engaging in NSSI is distressing to any caregiver, and caregivers will often immediately seek out ways that they can help. The primary responsibility of a parent or caregiver is to provide support and safe circumstances outside of school for a youth who engages in NSSI. This is best implemented by communicating clearly and consistently with the school's crisis response team and the youth.

Information gathered from National Association of School Psychologists
A self-harm safety plan is a list of coping strategies, resources, and trusted individuals that someone can refer to when they feel the urge to self-harm—defined as intentionally hurting oneself. Self-harm, sometimes called self-injury or self-mutilation, is often a way to cope with difficult feelings, painful memories, or overwhelming situations. A self-harm safety plan outlines healthy alternatives for managing these painful emotions or feelings of distress.

A comprehensive and effective self-harm safety plan should be written in your own words, be easy to read, and include actionable items. Below are five essential sections to include in a self-harm safety plan.

1. Triggers and warning signs
2. Distraction techniques
3. Coping strategies
4. Support system
5. Emergency support

Self-harm plans are also important because they can promote overall emotional well-being. Self-harm isn’t a mental illness, but research shows it is usually a warning sign of deeper mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety disorders, and bipolar disorder. And when left untreated, self-harm can lead to a toxic cycle of shame, guilt, and emotional suffering. Having a self-harm plan can empower people to take care of themselves and take control of their mental health.

Information gathered from Charlie Health