

# Teen Self-Injury

## | What Parents Need to Know

:: parenting series ::

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**Teen self-injury is alarmingly common.** Some recent studies report that one third to one half of teens have engaged in at least one episode of non-suicidal self-injury in their lifetime. Perhaps you've overheard your children talk about peers self-injuring; perhaps you have seen a story on the news or read an article; perhaps you are concerned that your child may be at risk. **Because it is an increasingly common adolescent struggle, all adults who have a teen in their lives can benefit from an increased understanding of self-injury.**

### What is self-injury?

Self-injury often takes the form of intentionally cutting or burning skin, but can include a wide variety of other behaviors, including self-punching, pinching, and interfering with healing of existing wounds. These behaviors are not suicidal actions, and are not intended to end life, although suicidal thoughts are common in those who self-injure. This begs the question:

### Why do some teens willfully hurt themselves?

The answer is complex, as self-harm can serve many functions for teens. Self-harming behavior was once thought to be exclusively associated with depression, eating disorders, mental retardation, and borderline personality disorders. We now know that many teens, even when they do not meet diagnostic criteria for any particular mental health disorder, are vulnerable to practicing self-harm. Non-suicidal self-injury is more common in kids who deal in emotional extremes: some are highly and intensely emotionally reactive; others are emotionally avoidant and not emotionally expressive.

It is developmentally typical for teens to struggle with emotion regulation; one of the "functions" of self-injury is as an attempt to distract from or reduce intensity of negative emotions and thoughts. Some teens that I've worked with report injuring themselves in order to "feel something" when experiencing emotional numbness, dissociation, or "emptiness." Others harm themselves as "punishment" when they believe themselves deserving of pain. Self-injury is typically an act in response to emotional turmoil, and is not meant to manipulate or garner attention. Self-harm is an attempt to cope, although a potentially harmful and dangerous one.

Contrary to popular understanding, most teens that self-injure are not doing so to seek attention. Most self-injury is done in private, and kids often make significant effort to hide their behaviors from parents and peers. Many teens go to great lengths to hide their injuries. If you notice your child consistently wearing long sleeves or long pants when inappropriate for the weather or notice several unexplained cuts or bruises, it is important to ask your child directly if he or she has self-harmed.

### How should you respond if you discover a teen in your life is harming themselves?

Because self-harm is, at its core, an attempt at coping, the best response is one of support and grace. It's normal for parents to feel confused, scared, and even angry. Remain as calm as possible. Punishment and bargaining are not helpful for kids struggling with this issue. Assure your child of your care and love. Tell your child why self-injury concerns you. Your child likely expects that you would not know about or understand intentional self-injury. Speaking directly and frankly to your child about it could open an important door to healing. Discuss the need for additional support. If possible, allow your teen some input on from whom they will seek support. Pray with them. Then call a therapist. There is an addictive quality to self-harm, and many teens report difficulty stopping the behaviors once they become repetitive. It is essential to enlist the help of someone who can work with your child to learn new coping skills to manage emotional struggles.



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Your child may be resistant to intervention - self-harm has been helping him or her cope in some ways up to this point. Roll with the resistance; allow your child to express it and acknowledge your understanding of it. Let your child know that you believe there's hope, that things can and will get better. There is hope and healing for teens that self-injure and their families, and it begins with shining light into the darkness. ■

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