Self-Injury and Youth

Self-injury often begins around the ages of 12 to 14, and it is most commonly the result of feelings of sadness, distress, anxiety, or confusion. Teenagers often use self-injury as a way to cope with these negative emotions. Recent studies have found that one-third to one-half of adolescents in the US have engaged in some type of non-suicidal self-injury, although some studies put the rate at 13 to 23 percent. [1] [2]

Social Media and Self-Injury

Social media can both help and hurt when it comes to self-injury behaviors. Many adolescents will turn to social media sites, such as Instagram and Twitter, to find a source of support and to connect with others that are experiencing the same things that they are. However, posts on social media can also encourage self-destructive behavior. Research has shown that viewing content about self-harm, especially on social media, can be a trigger for behavior. [3]

While websites that specifically encourage self-harm or suicide are few in number, and certain social media apps have banned self-injury related content, online communities related to self-harm are still common. Furthermore, research has shown that youth that visit self-harm/suicide websites are 11 times more likely to have thoughts about hurting themselves. [4]

Shaming and Self-Injury

Body shaming, fat shaming, and slut shaming can place teenagers at a higher risk of self-injury. Feelings of shame can cause teenagers to feel heightened levels of distress and anxiety, and teens may resort to cutting and other forms of self-injury in order to relieve these negative feelings. [5][6]

How Can I Help Myself?

Know you are not alone. Because self-injury is relatively common, it's likely that there are people around who understand and can help. Try talking to a professional person around you, someone like your school psychiatrist, school nurse, or guidance counselor. If you're not comfortable with that, think about contacting your local MHA Affiliate or checking out the S.A.F.E Alternatives website.

Know you can get better. This is a difficult time in your life. However, with help, you can get to the point where you don't hurt yourself anymore.

If cutting or self-injuring is an activity that your friends do, or if you find yourself comparing self-harm behaviors, consider widening your social circle and hanging out with other people. This doesn't mean you have to abandon your current friends; it just means making new ones who don't remind you of self-injuring.

Figure out what stresses you out and drives you to self-injure. Avoid stressors if they are going to make you cut. Think about other things you could do to manage stress without turning to self-injury. Check out this list of distractions and alternatives.

Seek professional help - effective treatment is available for people who injure themselves. You'll have to talk to your parents to get started. For tips on having a conversation, check out, Time to Talk: Tips for Talking About Your Mental Health and Time to Talk: Talking to Your Parents.

It could take some time to see a doctor or other treatment provider. In the meantime, take steps to reduce the harm you are doing to yourself. This could mean hurting yourself fewer times than you normally would, making sure you don't get infections, or finding alternatives that are less harmful (like holding an ice cube, or snapping yourself with a rubber band).
How Can I Help a Friend who Self-Injures?

Ask about it. If your friend is hurting him/herself, they may be glad to have you bring it up so they can talk about it. If someone is not injuring themself, they are not going to start just because you said something about it.

Offer options, but don’t tell anyone what they should do, or have to do. If a person is using self-injury as a way to have some control, it won’t help if you try to take control of the situation. Helping your friend see ways to get help – like talking to a mental health professional, parent, teacher, or school counselor – may be the best thing you can do for them.

Seek support. Knowing a friend is hurting themself can be frightening and stressful. Consider telling a teacher or other trusted adult. This person could help your friend get the help he or she needs. You may feel that you don’t have the right to tell anyone else, but remember; you can still talk to a mental health professional about how the situation is affecting you, or you can get more information and advice from any number of organizations.

Remember you’re not responsible for ending the self-abuse. You can’t make your friend stop hurting themself or get help from a professional. The only sure thing you can do is keep being a good friend.

Tips for Parents

Do:

Be patient.

Learn about self-injury.

Address the issue as soon as possible—before stage 4.

Validate your child’s feelings. Remember that this is different from validating the behavior.

Speak to your child in calm tones, offer reassurance, and be a respectful listener.

Check in on how your child is doing regularly. Ask open-ended questions to build healthy communication habits.

Ask them what they need for support in order to stop their self-injury.

Take your child seriously. It is likely that your child is cutting in order to relieve feelings of stress, and not because they are seeking attention.

Give praise for positive change as you see it. When looking for improvement, look back over six-month period rather than focusing on short periods of time.

Focus on your child. It isn’t uncommon for parents to feel overwhelmed or wonder what they did wrong. Find supports to help you work through your own feelings and needs so that you can focus on supporting your child.

Take care of yourself. Model what good self-care looks like.

Maintain hope. Recovery takes time and feels difficult, but don’t give up.

Do Not

Think of ongoing self-injury as failures. Getting better is a process and “relapsing” in self-injury happens. When it does, identify what can change to improve chances for the future.

Responding in hurtful ways (yelling, giving harsh and lengthy punishments, threats, insults, etc.) increases stress for everyone and creates barriers to getting better.

Fight for power or control. You cannot control another person’s behavior and demanding that your child stop the behavior is generally unproductive.

Rationalize the behavior by thinking that your teen is just going through a phase that will be outgrown. The majority of adults who self-injure started their self-injury during adolescence.

Minimize the seriousness of this behavior. Cutting is often used to relieve feelings of stress, and reduce negative emotions.

Isolate your child. Your child needs ongoing support for recovery and this includes staying connected with friends. Find a way to talk about this
issue if there are disagreements to find a compromise that doesn't require isolation.
Focus on the self-injury. Concentrate on what is driving the behavior, not the behavior itself.

Sources


