



Ways to Help Your Teen if They Are Self-Harming

Discover the reasons behind cutting and other behaviors—and how you can help.

BY RONNIE KOENIG Published: [October 7, 2022](#)

The subject of self-harm can be difficult to talk about, especially when it comes to teens. It's troubling to see your child cut themselves on purpose. The reasons why a teen may cut themselves with a sharp object can seem bewildering to parents but it's often prompted by a need to deal with overwhelming emotions. A teen without other coping skills might turn to cutting due to relationship problems, loss of a loved one or any other number of reasons. If your teen is cutting, you might feel helpless, angry, upset and frustrated. Thankfully, there are things you can do to help.

UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM

“The most common types of self-harm are cutting; punching yourself or punching things (like a wall); burning yourself with cigarettes, matches or candles; pulling out hair; poking objects through body openings, breaking bones or bruising yourself,” says Ivan Lamourt, PsyD, director of counseling services at St. Benedict's Preparatory School in Newark.

While cutting is often thought of as something girls do, in recent years counselors have seen an increase in this behavior in boys as well. “We have seen a variety of issues where boys have resorted to not only cutting themselves, but also placing themselves in dangerous situations such as walking in traffic, walking on railroad tracks or engaging in substance abuse behavior,” says Lamourt.

There are many reasons why a teen might engage in self-harm behaviors. [Matthew B. Wasser](#), MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Summit Health in New Providence, says self-harm behavior tends to function as an outlet for teens dealing with significant emotional distress.

“The teen may be experiencing an episode of depression or anxiety,” says Wasser. “They could be dealing with interpersonal, academic or social struggles. Contacting a mental health professional is one of the most important steps that a parent can take to help a teen who is engaging in self-harm. Speaking with the teen’s pediatrician or school counselor would be a great place to start.”

TALKING TO YOUR TEEN

Ask your child what’s going on using clear, direct, non-judgmental language, suggests Lamourt. He says social isolation, which can be a byproduct of too much social media, can also be a cause. “We need to help teenagers to understand that feelings are not facts and to talk about situations,” he says. “It is imperative to help teenagers to understand their feelings accurately so they are able to deal with their emotions appropriately. It’s important to seek professional help to help teens deal with their powerful emotions.”

Often, cutting begins as an impulsive activity and in most cases is not a suicide attempt. Teens may want to experience a feeling of “waking up” from numbness or use cutting as a way to express anger. Most kids who cut do not want to die—in fact they may do it because they want to feel better. Remind teens that while cutting may provide a temporary feeling of “relief” it’s not a solution for the underlying problems.

Sometimes, self-harm can be due to a mental health problem such as depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders or obsessive thinking. Some people may have trouble controlling their impulses and cutting can become a compulsive behavior. A mental health professional is the best person to help deal with these serious issues.

Teens should also know that cutting can become a serious health risk. They may misjudge the depth of a cut or a cut may become infected, requiring medical attention and even hospitalization.

TAKING STEPS TOWARD HEALING

If you suspect your teen is cutting, make safety the number one priority, says Wasser. “We want to make the home environment as safe as possible. This includes limiting the teen’s access to things that they can potentially use to cut themselves, including knives and razors,” he says.

“Parents are encouraged to educate themselves about cutting and the reasons why their teen may be engaging in this behavior. A supportive, non-accusatory and non-judgmental approach to conversations surrounding cutting tends to work best.”

For teens who get over cutting, the first step is almost always admitting to the behavior and talking about it with a trusted person. That could be a parent, a teacher, a school counselor or a doctor.

“Teens will also respond better if there is a conversation and not a confrontation,” says Lamourt. Establish early on that open communication will be rewarded. Besides speaking to your teen’s pediatrician and a therapist, parents can get kids involved in activities that are connecting and not isolating. Lamourt suggests keeping a close eye on teens’ social media and possibly stopping their use of it until they feel better.

“Although teenagers can be moody, they need to know that they are important in their family,” says Lamourt. “Let them know that they are appreciated and loved and foster meaningful connections with them.”