

Top Tips for Managing Teen Self-Harm

Put a Safety Plan in Place

It's important for you to know that even though your child is self-harming they don't necessarily have any intent or desire to end their life. In fact some adolescents report that self-harm helps to *protect* them against suicide because it helps them cope with their distress. This said, self-harm is often an impulsive reaction to extreme distress and adolescents can cause themselves serious harm without meaning to.

Let your child know that you're worried about their safety and need to put some strategies in place to keep them safe until you feel confident they can ensure their own safety. It's important to emphasise that these measures are not a punishment.

Depending on your child's level of risk, safety strategies may include: checking on your child at regular intervals or your child needing to remain in rooms of the house where others are present, asking your child to hand in any self-harming instruments (e.g. cutting instruments, medications) or searching your child's room for self-harming instruments, locking up household medications, or sleeping in your child's room.

Watch for Warning Signs of Self-Harm

Adolescents aren't always forthcoming in reporting their self-harm so it's important to watch closely for warning signs like: unexplained cuts, burn marks, or scars; blood stains on bed sheets or clothes; blood-stained tissues or empty pill packets; hidden sharp objects; deliberate attempts to cover certain body parts; disappearing to a bedroom or the bathroom for long periods of time when distressed.

Seek Professional Help

If your child is self-harming make sure you seek help from a clinical psychologist. A clinical psychologist can help to identify the function of your child's self-harm so that your child can learn more adaptive coping strategies and skills for tolerating intense distress without self-harm. A clinical psychologist can also provide you with strategies for addressing the underlying causes of your child's self-harm (e.g. problem solving skills training, strategies for enhancing self-esteem), and help you to know how best to respond to self-harm if it occurs at home.

Your GP will be able to provide you with information about clinical psychologists in your area. Make sure that the clinical psychologist you see has experience working with adolescents and self-harm.

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TOP TIPS

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Self-Harm

Self-harm is a growing trend in teens. Cutting and medication overdoses are the most common forms of self-harm, but other examples are:

- Self-inflicted burns
- Self-directed aggression (scratching)
- Swallowing sharp objects
- Risky behaviour

Teens self-harm for a number of reasons, but usually it's to cope with intense emotion – physical pain offers a temporary relief from high anxiety and distress. Teens might also self-harm:

- Because they believe they're inherently bad or worthless
- To communicate their distress to others in an attempt to elicit empathy and understanding
- To influence the behaviour of others ("If you don't let me I'll cut myself")

It can be alarming to learn that your child is hurting themselves and most parents are confused about what they should do.

This tips sheet outlines basic strategies for keeping your child safe, but if your child is self-harming you should also speak to your GP about a referral to a Clinical Psychologist.

In a crisis situation take your child to A&E