

What Is Self-harm?

Self-harm may include cutting, picking, scratching, burning, biting and excessively piercing or tattooing one's body to reduce, express or cope with overwhelming, painful emotions. The pain is a way to transform an emotional state to a physical one. Self-harm is usually done in private and is not typically considered an attention seeking behavior.

Self-harm is not necessarily a suicide attempt and often has nothing to do with wanting to die. It can be a symptom of an underlying mental health condition such as an eating disorder, depression, anxiety or borderline personality disorder. Young adults often report using self-harm to cope with their negative feelings because they do not know healthier ways to handle or express their distress.

Self-harm is known by many names, including self-abuse, self-mutilation, deliberate self-injury and non-suicidal self-injury.

Who Self-Harms?

Self-harm is a growing concern among young adults. Those who seem to be most at risk for engaging in self-harm include:

- Females;
- Young adults questioning their sexuality; and
- Young who have experienced emotional, physical and/or sexual abuse.

Why Self-harm?

Most young adults report engaging in self-harm for the following reasons:

- To self-soothe and to manage, relieve or reduce severe distress. This distress can be caused by anxiety, depression, stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, trauma, low self-esteem, or physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse.
- To release endorphins or “feel good” chemicals, which provide a sense of relief.
- To show feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness by making the emotional, internal pain a physical one.
- To communicate feelings of depression, anxiety or distress to the outside world.
- To combat feelings of numbness or to protect others from their emotional pain.
- To feel a sense of control over their lives, feelings or bodies. This often happens after a dramatic life change.

Some young adults self-harm publicly and in groups as a way to belong, bond and to show others that they have been in pain. This is rarer and in these instances the scars are viewed as a “badge of courage.” There may also be a contagion factor associated with self-harm, which can contribute to groups of young adults self-harming.

How Addictive is Self-harm?

Self-harm can be addictive both biologically and psychologically. Biologically, it can be experienced as a “runners high” when feel-good endorphins are released in the brain. Psychologically, someone can get addicted to this “high.”

Self-harm may serve as a form of self-medication for some young adults living with mental health conditions like depression and anxiety. Some people compare self-harm to behaviors like drinking, taking drugs or overeating, which can become addictive behaviors that help people feel better and combat a mental health condition.

Why Stop Self-harming?

Self-harm is a temporary solution to address feelings of distress. Oftentimes, the effects of self-harm wane over time, eventually making it an ineffective coping skill.

Self-harm has lasting consequences with scarring and injuries. Young adults who stop acts of self-harm often express regret that they disfigured their bodies and are now limited in what they are comfortable wearing. Self-harm can also lead to unintentional, serious injuries or dangerous infections.

What Can I Do To Stop Self-harming?

First off, do not be hard on yourself. There is no reason to feel guilt, shame or embarrassment. Be sympathetic toward the feelings of distress that led you to the behavior in the first place and acknowledge that self-harm may have been the only coping skill you felt you had available to use at the time.

It is important to have effective coping skills in place as you commit to stop acts of self-harm. Since self-harm is a way to handle overwhelming emotions, eliminating it completely without having healthier, alternative behaviors and coping mechanisms in place can lead to riskier behaviors.

Here are some action steps you can take to safely address self-harm:

- **Identify the issue.** Tell a trusted friend, family member or health care professional about your feelings and self-harming behavior. They can help you find the resources and support you need. If you are having trouble expressing how you feel verbally, write it down or find another way to express what you are experiencing, and share it with someone you trust.
- **Learn ways to resist self-harm and to shift your focus to other activities.** This may include simple things like taking deep breaths, counting to ten or calling or texting a friend. Find a way to distract yourself so you are not thinking about cutting or other forms of self-harm.

- **Begin investigating ways to express yourself that don't include self-harm.** This can include dancing, drawing, painting and writing.
- **Understand the Issue.** Ultimately, you will need to develop coping skills to replace self-injury and look deeper to understand the stressors and/or factors that led to self-harm. This may require help from a professional.

What Can Family and Friends Do?

Here are some ideas for how family and friends can help you to stop self-harming. You may also have your own suggestions to share with family and friends.

- **Validate your feelings.** It is important that family and friends recognize that self-harm is taking place and that you are doing it because of distress.
- **Offer to help.** Family and friends should ask you how they can help, listen to your feelings and work with you to develop proactive steps to get things going.
- **Suggest coping strategies.** Family and friends can share coping strategies with you that they use when they feel distressed or overwhelmed. These may or may not work for you but sometimes these suggestions can make a big difference.
- **Be open.** It is important not to hide the reality that you are engaged in self-harm and you need help to stop. Family and friends can help link you with services and supports that will ultimately lead to the development of alternative coping strategies and a deeper understanding of what is causing the distress that led you to self-harm.

What Services and Supports Are Available To Treat Self-harm?

There are numerous interventions for self-harm, including psychosocial (therapeutic) interventions and medications. There are also residential programs focused on treating self-harm.

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) is one form of therapy that is being used effectively with those who self-harm. DBT helps identify the causes of problematic behaviors, such as self-harm, the benefits of such behaviors and healthier alternatives (like exercising, talking, writing and more). DBT asks questions like these:

- How did you come to use self-harm as a coping mechanism?
- Does self-harm make you feel calmer and better?
- Are there better ways to reduce your distress that won't cause scars over time?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is also used to address self-harm. It teaches you how to notice and change thoughts that lead to negative behaviors or feelings. Mindfulness-Based Therapies can also be used for self-harm. It helps you focus on the present, accept yourself and improve your general well-being.

It is also important to focus on therapeutic interventions that get at the underlying conditions or feelings that caused you to engage in self-harm. This might involve other interventions, like medication, recommended by a provider.

Remember—you are not powerless over self-harm. Many young adults can and do stop self-harming with the right help and support and so can you.

Where Can I Find Additional Information on Self-Harm?

For additional resources and information on self-harm, visit the following websites:

- www.strengthofus.org to join an online resource center and social networking website that provides coping skills, strategies and peer support to young adults.
- www.twloha.com to join a movement that works to provide hope and help to people struggling with self-harm.
- www.crpsib.com for numerous resources on self-harm.
- www.selfinjury.com for a treatment approach, professional network and educational resource base committed to helping individuals stop self-harming behaviors.
- www.lifesigns.org.uk for peer support and resources to find alternative, healthier coping mechanisms.