



## Parental Guidance - Supporting a Teen Who Self-Harms



Discovering any form of self-harm in your child ignites fear and questions. But with compassionate understanding of the complex causes behind self-injury and some effective responses when it occurs, parents can provide critical support to stop the destructive behavior.

In this guide, we'll explore the faulty coping mechanism of self-harm, look at common underlying causes like trauma or mental illness, discuss calm intervention steps when injuries occur, and highlight treatment options focused on healing the emotional roots of pain teens desperately attempt to express through hurting themselves.

There is always hope—and help—once destructive behaviors come into the light.

## Defining Teen Self-Harm

Self-harm generally refers to injuring one's body on purpose without suicidal intent. Cutting remains most common, but self-harm can also appear as:

- Severe scratching, sometimes using sharp objects
- Burning with candles, matches, cigarettes
- Punching objects, walls, or themselves
- Head banging
- Pulling out hair
- Restrictive or bingeing eating disorders

Often hidden at first, self-harm reflects teens trying to cope with extreme emotional anguish they cannot articulate any other way. Physical pain offers momentary relief from deeper hurts, but long-term it only amplifies the inner battles they face.

## What Drives Teens to Self-Injure?

No single cause explains self-harm, but frequently contributing factors behind the surface-level behavior include:

- Anxiety, depression, or other untreated mental illness
- Need for control over inner turmoil
- Trauma or abuse
- Bullying, social isolation, identity struggles
- Physical illness or disability
- Family conflict
- Grief and loss
- Academic pressures or learning issues
- Emotional avoidance or numbness

Understanding possible root causes aids awareness. Getting teens needed support relies on how caring adults respond with compassion, not judgment, when self-harm comes to light.

## Understanding Why Self-Harm Makes Sense to Teens

While self-injury seems irrational to caring adults, it provides relief teens can't obtain otherwise:

- Physical pain releases endorphins, giving temporary calm from overwhelming emotions.
- Injuries provide an internal sense of control when external life feels out of control.
- Cutting allows teens to tangibly see and release inner distress they struggle articulating verbally.
- When emotions feel numb, self-harm sparks sensation and feeling when life seems devoid of both.
- Injuries provide distraction from problems teens feel powerless to solve or emotions they want to avoid.
- Acts of self-harm can function as self-punishment if teens believe they deserve pain.

Extreme as it may seem, self-harm makes sense to teens unable to healthily express or endure agonizing psychological anguish. Understanding why helps parents respond with compassion, not judgment.

## Responding With Care When Injuries Occur

Discovering cutting or burns understandably elicits an emotional reaction. But leading with empathy remains vital for keeping communication open:

- Acknowledge their pain feels real and overwhelming, even if the coping mechanism worries you. Make sure they know they can talk to you.
- Ask gentle questions about when/how the self-harm started and current frequency to gauge severity. Listen without anger.
- Assess immediate risk. If injuries are severe, risk of fatality is present, or threats of suicide occur, seek emergency services. Safety is priority one.
- If not an imminent emergency, have a candid discussion about healthier coping alternatives when the urge to self-harm returns. Brainstorm options like journaling, art, sports, or calling you or another trusted confidant.
- Remove access to means used for self-harm, but focus on addressing the root causes rather than just blocking the behavior.
- Express your unconditional love. Self-injury stems from shame and isolation, so kids believing they deserve pain need reminders of their inherent worth.

- Explore paths to therapy and treatment right away. Getting help processing the emotions that lead to harm is essential.

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## **Pursuing Professional Treatment and Support**

While parents provide essential emotional support day-to-day, securing mental health treatment in tandem ensures teen self-harm resolves long-term.

- Individual and family therapy unpack trauma, anxiety, dysfunctional family dynamics, and other factors driving self-injury. Both individual and family counseling are key.
- Group therapy allows teens to share experiences and strategies with peers also battling self-harm urges. They realize they are not alone.
- School counselors can arrange accommodations if anxiety behind self-harm causes absences. They also provide on-site skills coaching.
- Inpatient or residential programs may be needed in high-risk cases until self-harm impulses stabilize.
- Medication can help in some cases if depression, bipolar disorder, or severe anxiety fuel self-harm tendencies.

Ongoing communication with a collaborative team allows care professionals to adjust to teens' evolving needs until healthier coping becomes consistent habit.

## **Supporting Your Teen During Treatment**

Professional treatment succeeds best when paired with active parental support:

- Check in regularly on their mood and urge levels between appointments, but don't interrogate.
- Help them implement coping strategies like journaling or calling a friend when they feel like harming. Offer alternatives.
- Provide transportation and logistical help attending therapy and psychiatry appointments.
- Participate in family sessions as recommended. Be open about issues impacting your teen's mental health.



- Monitor medication, if prescribed, for side effects. Provide daily consistency around dosages.
- Work with their care team, but allow teens to lead in setting recovery goals and voicing preferences.
- Celebrate small wins like using a coping skill instead of self-harm. Focus on positives.
- Know that recovery is not linear. More setbacks may occur before sustainable progress.

Your empathy and consistency, even on the toughest days, tells your teen they're not facing this alone.

## **Hope for Healing the Roots of Pain**

Discovering self-inflicted wounds shakes parents to the core. But leaning into consistent comfort, connection, and professional treatment focused on the emotional roots behind the behavior allows teens to heal.

With time, tools, and unconditional support, teens can rewrite their stories, moving from shame and silence into self-acceptance and finding constructive ways to express inner anguish instead of burying hurt beneath wounds.

Each small step forward provides light. Despite inevitable setbacks, compassion and care keep teens from succumbing to darkness in isolation. Their precious lives and futures remain filled with promise when trusted adults walk with them until joy and purpose shine through.