

# Non-Suicidal Self-Harm

*Spotting the Signs  
and Taking Action*





# What is Self-Injury?

“Self-Injury is intentional, non-life-threatening, self-effected bodily harm or disfigurement of a socially unacceptable nature, performed while in a state of psychic crisis.”

Some common reasons that people self-harm are:

- ▶ To distract themselves from painful emotional feelings by causing physical pain
- ▶ To cope with feeling “stressed-out”
- ▶ As a way to punish themselves for feeling “bad”
- ▶ To take control of their body when they feel like the rest of life is out of control

There are many ways that people may self-harm. Some of these methods are obvious, and easy to detect, while there are other ways that may be more difficult to identify. Some examples are:

- ▶ Cutting
- ▶ Hitting
- ▶ Punching things, such as walls
- ▶ Burning
- ▶ Pulling out hair
- ▶ Rubbing skin so hard it causes a burn
- ▶ Picking at scabs
- ▶ Scratching
- ▶ Biting
- ▶ Banging head on surfaces

# Myths and Facts

**MYTH** People that self-harm are suicidal and want to die.

**FACT** Non-suicidal self-harm is not the same thing as trying to kill yourself. Many people self-harm in an attempt to take control of unwelcome feelings and are not doing it because they want to die. But people that self-harm and do not receive expert help are more likely to try to kill themselves.

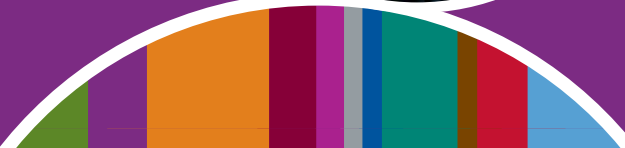
**MYTH** Only girls hurt or cut themselves.

**FACT** While more girls than boys self-harm, both boys and girls intentionally injure themselves. Self-harm isn't specific to gender; it and affects everyone.

**MYTH** People only cut themselves to get noticed or fit in. If you pay attention, it will just occur more often.

**FACT** Self-harm isn't about being "cool" or getting attention. It's a way some cope with stress or control emotions when life feels overwhelming. When people self-harm, they're usually trying to feel better, stop painful feelings, or just feel "normal." One may ask, what do you mean they want to

feel normal? Sometimes a person will have so much emotional pain that the only solution is to "numb" those feelings with physical pain.





**MYTH** People who hurt themselves are crazy or sick.

**FACT** People who self-harm have trouble regulating emotions. They are coping with painful feelings and have found an unhealthy way to cope. Self-harming may be a symptom of a more serious mental health problem that should not be overlooked. If you are worried about someone who is self-harming, the best approach is to talk about it and then ask a doctor to help.

## Warning Signs

If you think that your child may be self-harming but aren't sure how to tell, the best way to find out is to ask them directly without judgment.

There are also some things to look for that could mean they are self-harming:

- ▶ They wear clothing inconsistent with the season or temperature, such as long sleeve shirts and sweatpants in hot weather
- ▶ They spend a long time alone in the bathroom or bedroom
- ▶ You find razor blades or blood in the trash
- ▶ You find hidden stashes of sharp items and possibly antiseptics or Band-Aids
- ▶ Their mood changes from very stressed or sad to feeling happy or cheerful in a short amount of time

There are a wide variety of self-harming behaviors, and some children and teens self-harm repeatedly while others have only a few instances of the behavior. A comprehensive list of self-harming behaviors would be very long and difficult to compile.

## Tips for Parents

**TIP** Talk about it — and then listen.

If you think your child may be self-harming, talk to him or her about it. Kids harm themselves because they are in distress, may be holding pain inside, and don't know healthy ways to cope. The best way to help your child is to start a conversation about what's happening.

Let your child know you care and want to help. Try saying something like, "I want you to know that I love you and if you're hurting yourself, I'm here to help you. Let's talk about it."

**TIP** Focus on what's happening in your child's life. Your child may be unable to give a specific reason why he or she started to hurt him/herself. There may be several reasons. A child may be so stressed that he or she is unable to hold painful feelings inside, so cutting or other self-harm becomes a way to numb or distract oneself from the emotional pain. Your child's doctor, a school counselor, or a mental health professional can help you and your child understand why this happened.

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**TIP** **It's a treatable condition.** Self-harm may be a sign of an underlying treatable mental health problem. Children and adolescents self-harm because they are feeling overwhelmed and cannot find better ways to cope with stress. The behavior may stop; it may recur if there is a new pressure or it may escalate to more serious acts of self-harm. Whatever the pattern, it can be treated. The longer a child is self-harming, the more likely there could be serious consequences.

Ignoring the problem will not make it go away. If you worry that your child is self-harming, health care professionals like your doctor can provide help and advice. They can also help you talk about the problem with your child.

**TIP** **Communicate from a place of caring and love.** It is important to be calm, supportive, and in control of your own emotions. Your child may already be feeling ashamed or embarrassed. Raising your voice could make your child feel worse and close off any communication. It is natural for parents to feel like their child's self-harming behavior reflects on them as parents. Your child's self-harm does not mean you are a bad parent, or that the child did something wrong.

# Where to Find Help and More Information

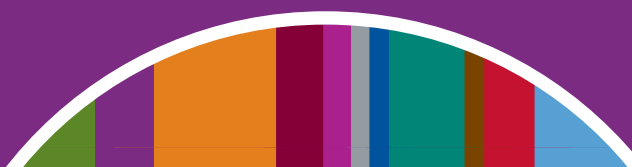
First, talk to your child's doctor. Your child's doctor, a key partner in dealing with self-harm, can do a mental health check-up and help you find counseling services and mental health experts. If you think your child is self-harming, make an appointment with your child's pediatrician or seek a referral to a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

Here are some more sources of reliable information:

**SAMHSA** — The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a National Mental Health Information Center that can direct you to mental health services in your state and region. You can reach them online ([www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)) or by calling (800) 789-2647.

**NIH** — The National Institutes of Health has information about self-harm and tools for finding expert help. Their web page on self-harm is [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/selfharm.html#cat8](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/selfharm.html#cat8).

**AACAP** — The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Facts for Families has information on self-injury, which can be found at [www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Self-Injury-In-Adolescents-073.aspx](http://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Self-Injury-In-Adolescents-073.aspx).



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**The Massachusetts Medical Society and its  
Committee on Violence Intervention and Prevention  
is grateful to and appreciative of the research and early  
draft by Public Health and Education intern Gregory B.  
Gould and the advice and edits of Elliot Pittel, MD, MPH, in  
the creation of this brochure.**

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