



Mental Health
& Addictions

IWK Health

Understanding self-harm – for caregivers

It's normal to feel overwhelmed, scared, and confused (or many other emotions) if you think that your youth may be self-harming.

This fact sheet will help you understand what self-harm is and how it develops.

You'll learn strategies to help support your youth, right now and in the long term.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves on purpose. It does not mean that someone wants to end their life. Self-harm looks different for different people. It might look like cutting, burning, or scratching.

Who self-harms?

Self-harm doesn't have a specific "look." People who self-harm may be of any age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or cultural background.

The most common time when people first self-harm is between 13 and 15 years of age. One research study found that 2 out of 10 young people (ages 14-21) in Canada had self-harmed at least once.

Why do people self-harm?

People self-harm for different reasons. These are some common reasons we hear from kids and teens:

- "I need relief from painful feelings"
- "I'm trying to cope with stress"
- "I feel numb, and I want to feel something"
- "I think I deserve punishment"
- "The pain feels good to me"
- "I need other people to know that I am suffering"
- "I have gotten used to self-harm and now it is a habit"

These reasons make a lot of sense. The good news is there are other ways to meet these needs that don't involve self-harm – and these other strategies are actually more helpful in the long term. We'll talk more about this below.

What helps?

Therapy can help people to self-harm less often or stop self-harming completely. A therapist can work with your youth to help them understand their self-harm better and find other strategies to replace self-harm. A therapist can talk with your youth to figure out:

- *What leads them to self-harm*
- *How to solve problems in stressful situations*
- *How to handle strong emotions and make them less overwhelming*
- *How to change unhelpful thoughts*
- *How to solve conflicts*
- *How to get support from other people*



How can I help right now?

Effective treatment can take a while, but there are many things you can do to help your youth right now:

- **Let your youth know you care through both your words and actions.** Tell them you love them and spend time together. Show your care not only when they self-harm, but also when they're struggling or when things are going well.
- **Acknowledge their feelings.** Remember that they may be very stressed and upset. Use validating statements, such as, "it makes sense to feel [worried], because [you have that math test tomorrow]." Ask how you can support them, even if they don't always know what to say.
- **Build trust.** Keeping calm and listening without judgment encourages your youth to share more with you. If you react with disgust, anger, or make your youth feel guilty when they talk about self-harm, it makes them less likely to share in the future.
- **Help your youth try other strategies to respond to big emotions.** Different things work for different people, and they might have to try a few things to find what works. For example, they could try: listening to music, holding an ice cube, deep breathing, smelling a pleasant scent, wrapping themselves in a soft blanket, or getting brief intense exercise (like jumping jacks).
- **Use basic first aid to take care of any minor cuts or other injuries.** If your youth needs medical care, like stitches, take them to the nearest hospital.
- **Keep the environment safe.** If it is harder for your youth to access things they can use to hurt themselves, they may be more likely to try other strategies first to respond to big emotions. Lock up things like firearms and prescription medications so your youth cannot get to them. This doesn't have to be a secret – you can tell your youth you are concerned about them and want to help them stay safe while they are dealing with self-harm.
- **Take care of yourself, too. When your own needs are met, you can better support your youth.** It is okay to take a moment to breathe and calm yourself before you respond. It is important to have strategies to take care of yourself, and different things work for different people. Reach out to people who can support you, even if you don't share all the details of what is going on.

