



Mental Health
& Addictions

IWK Health



Understanding self-harm – for kids & teens

Some people use self-harm as a way to cope with overwhelming emotions.

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

You'll learn strategies to help decrease your self-harm, 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 yourself.

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 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 you to help you understand your self-harm better and find other strategies to replace self-harm. A therapist can talk with you to figure out:

- *What leads you 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*

What can I do right now?

There are also some things you can try right now to help with self-harm.

■ When you feel the urge to self-harm, try a **coping strategy**. For example:

- Listen to music
- Call or text a friend
- Read a book
- Watch a favorite TV show or movie
- Count down from 100 to 0
- List as many animals as you can that start with the letter A, then B, then C. Keep going for as long as you need to until the urge passes
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Rip a sheet of paper into the tiniest pieces you can manage
- Do pushups, jumping jacks, or something else to move your body
- Drink cold water, hold an ice cube, or run cold water on your hands
- intense exercise (like jumping jacks)

If the first distraction you try doesn't help, try something else. Sometimes you may need to try a few different things. Over time, the urge to self-harm will become less strong.



■ **Talk to someone** about your self-harm. For example:

- A parent, caregiver, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or another family member
- A school counselor
- Contact Kids Help Phone to talk with a trained responder at any time:
 - Call 1-800-668-6868
 - Text CONNECT to 686868
 - Message online at connect.crisistextline.ca.org/chat

■ **You don't have to deal with this alone.** Just telling someone what you're going through can help a lot, even if all they do is listen.

■ **While you work on self-harming less often, think about ways to make it safer.** This is sometimes called harm reduction. For example, if you cut yourself, make sure you clean the wound and put a bandage over it.

■ **Remember:** it takes time to change a behavior, especially if it is something you have been doing for a long time. Be patient with yourself and don't give up.