

## Know! The Facts: Understanding Teens Who Self-Harm

Why would anyone intentionally cause themselves physical pain? Self-harm is a hard concept for many of us to wrap our minds around. A new study, however, reveals self-harming behaviors to be more common in youth than most of us realize, and that the impact of such behaviors is likely to cause problems in both the short and long-term.

What exactly is self-harm? It is any type of deliberate and direct injury to one's own body. It may come in the form of cutting, scratching, burning, head-banging, pulling out hair, piercing skin with sharp objects or taking too many pills. Some youth may self-harm once or twice and then stop, while for others, it becomes routine behavior.

In a Bristol University study in England, out of the nearly 5,000 16-year-olds who participated, 19 percent said they had harmed themselves at least once. The study also revealed that those self-harming teens were more likely to experience problems in school and in their relationships, difficulties in their workplace down the road, and were at increased risk for developing alcohol or other drug-related issues later in life.

When it comes to "why" youth self-harm, there is no one single reason. However, medical experts say that it usually occurs among teens due to an inability to cope with emotional pain in healthy ways. Youth who self-harm tend to experience feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, panic, anger, rejection, self-hatred or confused sexuality.

According to the Mayo Clinic, youth who self-harm may be attempting to:

- Manage or reduce severe distress or anxiety and provide a sense of relief;
- Provide a distraction from painful emotions through physical pain;
- Feel a sense of control over his or her body, feelings or life situations;
- Feel something, anything, even if it's physical pain, when feeling emotionally empty;
- Express internal feelings in an external way;
- Communicate depression or distressful feelings to the outside world;
- Be punished for perceived faults.

Regardless of why individuals self-harm, the momentary "relief" is usually followed by guilt, shame and the return of painful, negative emotions. In addition to the inner scars, self-harm may produce permanent physical scars and disfigurement, cause severe infection, serious injury or could lead to death.

While visible scars are the most obvious sign of self-harm, other red flags include your child wearing long sleeves or long pants, even when it's hot outside; claiming to have frequent accidents or mishaps; spending a great deal of time alone; asking questions like 'Who am I?' or 'What am I doing here?'; behavioral and emotional instability, impulsivity and unpredictability; and statements of hopelessness or worthlessness.

Any act of self-harm needs to be taken seriously. Do not dismiss it as merely attention-seeking. Know that such actions may be warning signs for suicidal behavior or other problems.

Despite how taboo the topic may seem, self-harm must be talked about and better understood in order for those experiencing it to get the help they need, and to prevent others from taking the same path. If you suspect or know your child is self-harming, seek outside help immediately. Start by consulting your pediatrician or family physician. Or check with your employer about a link to your insurance provider's mental health services or, if your company provides one, contact your employee assistance program.

Some youth who self-harm may not have suicidal intentions. However, if you feel your child is in immediate danger of attempting suicide, stay with him/her and call for emergency help. Another option is to call the **Suicide Hotline at 800-273-TALK** to be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area.

**Source:** [Partnership for Drug Free Kids: Self-Harming Teens More Likely to Develop Substance Use Problems](#). [Mayo Clinic: Self Injury/Cutting](#). [Medical Daily: Self-Harm In Teenage Years Predicts Substance Abuse, Lower Grades, And Difficulties At Work](#). [Psychology Today, Overcoming Self-Sabotage: How to understand and regulate destructive behaviors](#).

Talking regularly with youth about the dangers of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs reduces their risk of using in the first place.

Know! encourages you to share this Parent Tip with friends and family.

[Click here to join others who Know! by taking the Know! Pledge.](#)

Know! is a program of:



Drug Free Action Alliance

Drug Free Action Alliance  
6155 Huntley Road, Suite H  
Columbus, Ohio 43229

Lifetime Prevention  
Lifetime Wellness



Link to the article on the  
Drug Free Action Alliance  
Facebook Page