

SELF-INJURY

WHAT IS IT?

Self-injury, or cutting, refers to deliberately causing physical harm to oneself without intending to commit suicide. People often turn to self-injury as an unhealthy method of managing difficult feelings such as emotional distress, sadness, frustration, or overwhelming stress. Life-threatening injuries are not the purpose of self-injury, but it is possible that they could happen.

With appropriate professional help, individuals can develop healthier strategies for managing and coping with their emotions.

CAUSES

There's no one single cause that leads someone to self-injure. In general, self-injury may result from poor coping skills and difficulty managing emotions.

Self-injury may be an attempt to:

- Manage or reduce severe distress or anxiety.
- Provide a distraction from painful emotions.
- Feel a sense of control.
- Feel something — anything — when feeling emotionally empty.
- Express internal feelings in an external way.
- Communicate feelings of stress or depression to the outside world.
- Punish oneself.



RESOURCES

CORNELL UNIVERSITY

www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/resources.html

JED FOUNDATION

jedfoundation.org/resource/how-to-cope-with-non-suicidal-self-injury

in the know

© 2025 Prevention & Treatment Resource Press
877-329-0578
www.PTRPress.com • product #PB-PS49
This pamphlet may not be copied.

SELF-INJURY

BE KIND TO
YOURSELF





WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Symptoms and signs of self-injury may include:

- Scars, often in patterns.
- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, bite marks or other wounds.
- Excessive rubbing of an area to create a burn.
- Keeping sharp objects or other items used for self-injury on hand.
- Wearing long sleeves or long pants to hide self-injury, even in hot weather.
- Frequent reports of accidental injury.
- Difficulties in relationships with others.
- Behaviors and emotions that change quickly and are impulsive, intense and unexpected.
- Talk of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness.



WHEN AND HOW TO GET HELP

If you're injuring yourself, even in a minor way, or if you have thoughts of injuring yourself, reach out for help. Any form of self-injury is a sign of bigger stressors that need attention.

Talk to someone you trust — such as a friend, family member, health care provider, spiritual leader, or a school counselor, nurse, or teacher. They can help you take the first steps to successful treatment. While you may feel ashamed and embarrassed, you can find supportive, caring help from people who aren't going to judge you.



ANSWERING A CRY FOR HELP

Take all symptoms and talk of self-injury seriously. Although you might feel that you'd be betraying something told to you in confidence, self-injury is too big a problem to deal with alone.

Here's how to help:

Your child. Talk with your pediatrician or other health care provider who can make a referral to a mental health professional. Express your concern, but don't yell at your child.

Preteen or teenage friend. Suggest that your friend talk to parents, a teacher, a school counselor, or another trusted adult.

Adult. Gently express your concern and encourage the person to seek medical and mental health treatment.



If you've injured yourself severely, do not hesitate, call 9-1-1!

IF YOU ARE HAVING SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

Call your mental health provider if you have one.

Call or text 9-8-8 to reach the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. For Spanish, call 1-888-628-9454.

Reach out to your school nurse or counselor, teacher, or healthcare provider.

Reach out to a close friend or family member.

Contact a spiritual leader or someone else in your faith community.



RISK FACTORS

Teenagers and young adults are most likely to self-injure, but those in other age groups do it, too. Certain factors may increase the risk of self-injury, such as:

- Having friends who self-injure.
- Past abuse or trauma.
- Mental health issues.
- Alcohol or drug use.



PREVENTION

There is no sure way to prevent someone's self-injuring behavior. But reducing the risk includes strategies that involve both individuals and communities.

- Identify someone at risk and offer help.
- Encourage supportive social networks.
- Raise awareness.
- Encourage friends to seek help.