

SELF HARM & CUTTING IN TEENS

RISKS, WARNINGS & TREATMENT



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Introduction

Self-harm is the intentional act of inflicting physical pain on the body. According to Psych Central, 2 to 3 million Americans engage in some form of self-injury each year. This injury could include anything from cutting, burning, striking, picking, biting, carving, etc. to the point of soft tissue damage.

A common form of self-injury is cutting. Cutting is the act of purposely injuring the body with a sharp object, breaking skin and making it bleed. While some adults may participate in acts of cutting as a form of self-injury or SI, this action is especially prevalent in teenagers.

When a ‘cutter’ or self-harmer cuts themselves they typically will inflict the wound on the arms, wrists, legs or stomach. The wounds will eventually heal, leaving scars. Many who inflict self-harm or engage in cutting keep their scars and cuts hidden. Some may live with scars without anyone ever knowing that the act was committed.

Aside from cutting, teens may also participate in other self-harming behaviors. Another popular example is burning. Teens may use the end of a cigarette or lighted match to burn their skin. Subtler forms of self-harm include things like biting or picking away at the skin. Other [teenagers](#) may pull out their hair. All of these acts, when intended to inflict self-harm, are considered self-mutilation.

Myths Concerning Self-Harming Behavior

While it is often believed that teens who injure themselves are suicidal, this is not often the case. According to WebMD, the opposite is often true. Many teens who engage in cutting and other self-injurious behavior are trying to cope with life and continue to live. However, just because the teen may not be defined as suicidal because of self-mutilating behavior does not mean it should be taken lightly.

Another myth concerning teen cutting and self-harm is that the actions are done for attention. While this may be true for a select number of teens who have fallen into peer pressure or see the concept as a way to get attention, the majority of those engaging in this behavior are ashamed of their actions. They may feel guilt or shame that cutting or harming themselves is their coping mechanism of choice. In fact, many teens who harm themselves carefully keep their injuries, wounds, and scars hidden. This adds to the stress of life and coping, and can put the teen into a deeper cycle of self-harm.

Why Teens Engage in Self-Harm and Cutting

According to Psych Central, self-harming occurs in individuals of all ages, socio-economic groups, and ethnic groups. Self-harming behavior does not discriminate in our society. In fact, many parents are often shocked to find out that their child has been harming themselves. Valedictorians, church goers, and seemingly successful teens are not necessarily exempt from the temptations to self-harm.

So why do some people choose to cut or harm themselves? One major trigger of self-harming behavior is stress. While we all experience stress, it can feel very different to different people. Stress can cause individuals to be [anxious](#), excited, nervous, sad, frustrated, angry, or it may drive ambition. Stress appears in varying levels and varying degrees. Sometimes teenagers [stress](#) about things that have happened. Perhaps they failed a test, or they had a friend injured in a car accident. Other times stress is related to things in the future. Where will they go to college? Will they get accepted? Will their parents be upset about their grades?

According to WebMD, psychologists have found that self-injury can get rid of tension and other negative emotions at a rapid rate. But just like drugs, this ‘fix’ is only temporary. It is very important to recognize self-injurious behavior in your teen, so that healthy coping mechanisms can be learned early. Otherwise, cutting and self-harm can continue on into adulthood.

As we discussed, teenagers who cut are often dealing with emotional stress or [anxiety](#). In some cases, these teens are suffering from [depression](#). However, the most common diagnosis for a teen with self-injuries is borderline personality disorder or BPD. Psych Central explains that borderline personality disorder is a condition that often leads to intense emotions among individuals who have difficulty regulating them. As a result, individuals suffering from BPD may turn to cutting or self-harm as a way to reduce negative emotional states and regulate emotions through this behavior. Cutting is also an injurious behavior of individuals with a [dissociative disorder](#). For those suffering stress or anxiety in part with the dissociative disorder, cutting is a way for the individual to 1. remove themselves and disassociate from the pain in a ‘birds eye view’ or 2. return to the body after the pain has subsided.

While some teenagers who harm themselves identify with mental disorders, many do not. Just because your teen has no diagnosed mental or behavioral condition does not mean that they will never harm themselves. This can be a terrifying thought for parents, as no parent wants to think of their child as hurting in any way. That is why it is particularly important to identify the warning signs of self-injury in your teen.

Warning Signs of Teen Self-Harm or Cutting

It is important for you as the parent to identify the signs and symptoms of self-harming behavior. As your teen’s behavior will often remain carefully hidden, recognizing these symptoms will be essential to getting effective treatment for your teen.

According to the Mayo Clinic, some signs that your teen may be cutting or intentionally harming themselves include:

- Scars (particularly on the wrists, arms, thighs, legs, ankles or stomach— any area that can be covered by clothing)
- Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises or other wounds
- Keeping sharp objects on hand
- Wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather

- Difficulties in interpersonal relationships
- Persistent questions concerning their identity: “Who am I?” “Why am I here?”
- Behavior instability, impulsivity and unpredictability
- Emotional instability, volatility
- Statements of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness
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Is Your Teen at Risk to Start Cutting?

According to the Mayo Clinic, there are a number of factors that may increase your teen’s risk for cutting or engaging in self injurious behavior.

These factors include:

- Age. Self-injury often begins in the volatile years of the early teens. At this time your teen will face increased peer pressure, changes in emotions, feelings of loneliness, questions of self-identity, and conflicts with parents or authority figures.
- Peer Pressure. Believe it or not, self-injury can be a result of [peer pressure](#). If you teen has a friend who uses self-harm as a coping mechanism, your teen is more likely to also participate.
- Life Issues. Some people who cut or self-harm were neglected or abused as children. They may question their self-worth. Others have experienced other traumatic events. Some may be in an unstable family environment or feel socially isolated.
- Mental Health Issues. Self-injurers are often highly self-critical or can be poor problem-solvers. Self-injury is also associated with mental disorders such as borderline personality disorder, [depression](#), [anxiety disorders](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), or [eating disorders](#).
- Excessive Drug or Alcohol Use. Some individuals who harm themselves are often under the influence of [drugs](#) or [alcohol](#). This is particularly dangerous as they are not always conscious of the extent or consequences of their actions.

Dangers of Self-Injurious Behavior in Teenagers

While cutting or self-injury is often a temporary relief to pain, there is a very real risk that these actions can become compulsive behavior. According to Kids Health, when cutting becomes an impulse behavior the brain begins to crave it as a way of relief from emotional pain. Cutting or self-harm, at this point, becomes like an addiction and can seem impossible to quit. This act of control over emotions can end up controlling your teen; even into adulthood.

Another risk of self-harm can include permanent damage. While many teenagers who cut or harm do not intent to hurt themselves, it is very possible to misjudge depth or location of a cut. Stitches or even hospitalization can be required as a result of these types of incidents. Cuts can also become infected with the use of non-sterile cutting instruments. Many teenagers use anything they can such as: razors, scissors, safety pins, staples, or even the tab from a soda can.

Alternatives to Self-Harm

Teens who self-harm are often looking for a coping mechanism to deal with extreme stresses in their lives. It is important for these teens to develop healthy coping skills and habits in order to leave cutting behind.

Some examples of healthy coping mechanisms include:

- Exercising
- Playing a musical instrument like the piano or drums
- Meditating or Praying
- Speaking with someone they trust

Treatment is Available for Teens who are Cutting or Harming Themselves

Sometimes these healthy coping mechanisms are enough draw the teen away from self-harm. However, when cutting or harm becomes a constant or consistent part of a teen's life, additional help is often required.

Self-harm is a sensitive topic, as it is a response to negative emotion. It is important to seek help that is not condemning, but seeks to provide healthy alternatives and treatments in a loving way. There is no direct treatment for self-injury, as the act is often a reaction to an underlying issue. Recovery from self-injury takes time and the teen's desire to heal.

In some cases, mental health conditions are a root cause of self-injurious behavior. In these instances, treatment may be administered for conditions such as anxiety, bipolar disorder, or depression.

Psychotherapy, or talk therapy, is one treatment option for teens with self-injurious behavior. Through this process teens will learn to identify the underlying cause of their desires to harm themselves. They will also learn healthy coping mechanisms and ways of dealing with stress and negative emotions. Psychotherapy assists a teen in gaining a positive self-image, improving social skills, and regulating emotions.

Types of individual psychotherapy that may be helpful to a teen suffering from self-harm include: cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), Dialectical behavior therapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy and mindfulness-based therapy.

Get Help for Teens Suffering from Self-Harm

One such option for a teen suffering from self-harm is a residential treatment center like Shepherds Hill Academy. Shepherds Hill Academy offers a safe environment for your teen to find positive and healthy methods for dealing with stress, while as growing personally and academically.

At Shepherds Hill Academy, your teen will be under the care of our residential team, counselors, and therapists. We offer both a separate girls and boys program, allowing your teen to be free from emotional and relational distractions and focus on their personal healing and growth.

Your teen will also be free of negative peer pressure, pop culture, and media. Our [wilderness component](#) strips away the complexities of a technologically driven world in order to discover and resolve the deep rooted issues in your teen.

The fully licensed therapeutic staff at Shepherds Hill Academy offers [therapeutic plans](#) specific to the needs of your teen. With extensive training and proficiency in Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Mindfulness Therapies and other proven therapeutic methods, Shepherds Hill Academy provides an environment that is conducive to healing for teens dealing with self-injury.

Is your teen suffering from stress and anxiety? Are these negative emotions and pressures leading them to self-harm? Shepherds Hill Academy can help! Please call us today at [706-770-5576](tel:706-770-5576) or [inquire online](#) today.

Article Resources:

- <https://psychcentral.com/lib/teens-who-self-harm/?all=1>
- <http://kidshealth.org/en/teens/cutting.html>
- <http://teens.webmd.com/cutting-self-injury#1>
- <https://psychcentral.com/news/2010/08/31/why-self-harm-feels-good-in-the-brain/17456.html>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/self-injury/symptoms-causes/dxc-20165427>