



youth service bureau

Understanding Self-Harm: What Parents Can Do

By: *Emily Johnson, M.S.W., LGSW, YSB Youth and Family Therapist*

Self-harm can be very difficult for parents to understand, and is oftentimes just as confusing for the young person who is doing it to themselves. Parents wonder just how serious the self-harming is, and if their child is trying to end his or her life. Self-harming incidents are often not one-in-the-same as suicide attempts, but there are obvious safety concerns associated with cutting and other types of self-harm. For example, sometimes children accidentally cut themselves too deep, causing serious injury. Here are some tips for parents who suspect their child may be self-harming:

1) Assess the situation to make sure your child is safe.

To help determine if your child is safe, talk with your child and consider the following questions:

- What is my child's motivation for self-harming? Are they self-harming or are they suicidal?
- How deep are the cuts? Is first aid needed to disinfect and protect the wound? Are the injuries superficial or do they require medical attention?
- If you aren't sure, call a 24-hour crisis line or nursing line for help.

If needed, get appropriate medical attention as soon as possible. It's important that medical attention is sought for children who are actively suicidal, are a danger to themselves or others, or whose injuries are just too severe to care for at home. If you aren't sure, bring them in just to be safe.

2) Open the lines of communication.

Opening the lines of communication can help your child process his or her experience, while giving the message that you are open to talking about self-harm. Validate your child's feelings, offer reassurance, and consider asking questions like:

- What led up to the self-harm?
- How does it feel when you self-harm? Does it make you feel better? Worse? How?
- Is there anything I can help you with?
- If you don't want to talk about it now, I understand. Just know that I am here for you when you're ready.

The most important thing is to truly listen! Avoid lecturing, yelling, harsh punishments, invasions of privacy (such as going through your child's things or bedroom), threats, and ultimatums, and do not pressure your child if he or she is not ready to talk.

3) Seek support for your child.

Children cut and self-harm for many different reasons. But no matter how superficial it may seem, self-harm is almost always an indication that your child needs some mental health and/or emotional support right away. A counselor or therapist can help your child learn ways to cope, express his or her emotions, identify triggers, and problem-solve to ultimately decrease and/or stop the self-harming

behavior. They are also professionally trained to recognize warning signs of underlying mental health concerns and suicide risks, to determine if a higher level of care may be needed. A lot of times, outpatient therapy is very effective in helping young people with their self-harming behavior.

4) Seek support for yourself.

No one wants to see their child in pain, and it can be especially difficult when your child is the one inflicting pain on himself or herself. It can be helpful for parents to also see a counselor or therapist, participate in family therapy with their children, and/or do regular self-care activities. Not only is taking care of yourself a great way for you to support yourself and your family, but it is an excellent opportunity to model to your child how he or she can handle stressful situations.

At Youth Service Bureau, we can help youth who struggle with self-harm! Please give us a call for more information or to set up an appointment with a Youth and Family Therapist.