

Understanding Self-Harm in Teens: A Guide for Parents

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What is Self-Harm?

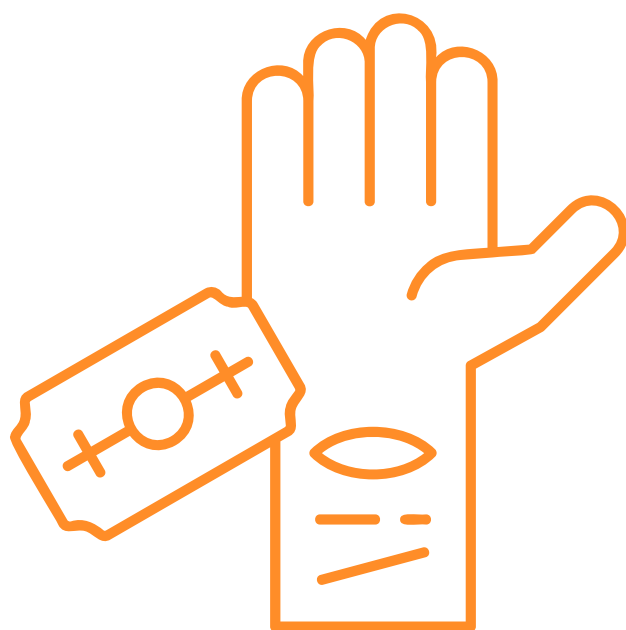
Self-harm refers to intentional behaviours aimed at causing injury or distress to oneself. It can include physical acts like cutting, burning, hitting, or ingesting harmful substances, and may also involve behaviors like overeating, undereating, or excessive exercise.

Self-harm is a coping strategy to manage intense emotions.

Why Do Teens Self-Harm?

Teens self-harm to regulate overwhelming emotional pain or distress. Some reasons include:

- **Numbing emotional pain** or distracting from feelings of sadness, anxiety, or anger.
- **Seeking control** when they feel powerless.
- **Releasing emotional tension**, as physical pain can lead to temporary emotional relief.
- **Communicating distress** when they cannot verbally express their emotions.



Why is Self-Harm Increasing?

Several factors contribute to the rise in self-harm among teens:

1.

- **Emotional dysregulation** due to ongoing brain development during adolescence, making teens more vulnerable to emotional swings.

2.

- **Peer and media influence**, with social media, TV shows, and peer groups normalising self-harm.

3.

- **Peers Vs Parents:** As teens seek independence, they may rely more on peers than parents, which might limit their exposure to healthier coping mechanisms.

4.

- **Peer and media** Stigma around mental health prevents many teens from seeking help, leaving them to turn to harmful coping mechanisms instead.

It is estimated that 10-20% of teens may engage in self-harm. In a class of 30, 3-6 students might be struggling with self-harm.



Self-Harm

Boys, Girls, Neurodiversity and Eating Issues

- **Girls** typically self-harm more than boys, peaking around ages 16-17.
- **Boys** may engage in more aggressive forms of self-harm, such as punching walls, with behaviours peaking later in adolescence.
- **Neurodiversity:** Self-harm may be linked to neurodiversity, such as autism, where it could relate to sensory processing, emotional regulation, or communication challenges.
- **Eating Issues.** Self-harm behaviour may manifest and transition to different forms, such as eating issues. It's important to work with healthcare professionals to understand all of the interconnected coping mechanisms, rather than in isolation. Understanding and addressing the root causes, even when they aren't immediately apparent, is vital to preventing the cycle from continuing and to minimise the recurrence of other behaviours.



How Can You Spot the Signs?

- **Behavioural changes**, such as withdrawing from family, friends, or activities they once enjoyed.
- **Physical signs**, like covering their body, especially in warm weather, to hide injuries.
- **Mood fluctuations**, including increased withdrawal, signs of depression, or sudden changes in behaviour.
- **Social changes**, like shifts in school performance or changes in friendship circles.

How Does Self-Harm Progress and Develop?

Self-harm often starts in adolescence, triggered by stress or emotional crises (e.g., exams). Without intervention, it can escalate. However, many teens naturally outgrow self-harm as they develop better emotional regulation, experience less stress, and find healthier coping methods. Professional support can help build these skills and reduce self-harm.

How Can You Help Talk to a Teen About Self-Harming?

- **Be calm and non-judgemental** in your approach.
- **Acknowledge their feelings** and avoid minimising their emotions.
- **Ask open-ended questions** to help them express themselves.
- **Listen actively** without interrupting, and give them space to talk at their own pace.
- **Offer reassurance** that you are there to help and will support them through this challenge.

Handling Self-Harm Incidents – In the Moment

These suggestions are not personalised advice. Always consult a healthcare professional for guidance, especially if your teen is at risk.



- **Immediate Care & Risk Assessment:** If injuries are serious (deep cuts, risk of infection, or safety concerns), seek medical help or contact emergency services. For minor injuries, clean the wounds gently and provide emotional support to help your teen feel safe.



- **Offer Comfort & Space:** Once safety is addressed, offer comfort—whether it’s a calming presence, space, or a quiet activity to help them de-escalate.



- **Prepare Yourself:** Before approaching your child, make sure you are emotionally ready. You may hear things that are distressing.



- **Be Empathetic:** Ask open-ended questions to understand their feelings without pressure, like, “How are you feeling right now?” to invite conversation without pressure.
 - Curiosity-Based: Try non-confrontational observations, such as “I’ve noticed that things seem different for you lately. I’m curious about how you’re feeling right now.”
 - Indirect Discussion: Sometimes it helps to talk about the issue in a broader context, such as discussing a relevant TV show or a situation with a friend.
 - If verbal discussion is challenging, explore other ways such as writing notes, using emojis, or creating a shared journal.



- **Listen, Don’t Fix:** Focus on listening and validating their feelings. Avoid jumping in with solutions unless they ask for help.



- **Focus on the Underlying Issues:** Address the root causes of distress, rather than the self-harm itself. What are they trying to cope with, and how can you help?



- **Be Patient:** Understand that healing and change take time. Keep offering support even if they aren’t ready to talk.



- **Be Persistent:** If your child is reluctant to talk, let them know you’re there for them and will revisit the conversation. Persistence is key.

Minimising Risk - Moving Forward

- **Develop a Safety Plan.** A safety plan should be a written plan, often stored on the young person's phone, outlining steps to take if they feel the urge to self-harm, including coping strategies and supportive services. It can include immediate actions, like addressing safety and emotional support, and long-term strategies to ensure they feel understood and safe.
- **Encourage Healthy Coping:** Suggest activities like physical exercise, art, or connecting with a trusted friend or adult.
- **Consider Professional Support:** Help them access a mental health professional who can guide them through learning healthier coping strategies.
- **Monitor Social Media:** Watch for any content or online activity that might trigger negative feelings or behaviours in your teen.
- **Remove Harmful Items:** Together, discuss and remove any objects that could be used for self-harm, making sure the conversation remains calm and non-judgemental, and about safety.

Alternative Coping Strategies

Low-Intensity Strategies: Encourage journaling, hobbies, or grounding exercises (e.g., focusing on the five senses) to help manage stress.

High-Intensity Strategies: Techniques like splashing cold water on their face or applying ice to the back of the neck can quickly reduce emotional intensity.

Coping Boxes: Create a box filled with soothing items (stress balls, calming scents, helpful notes) to help manage the urge to self-harm.

Riding the Wave: Teach your teen the "Riding the Wave" technique, where they visualize their emotions like waves, learning to ride through them until they pass. (You can find helpful videos on YouTube for this technique.)

What Can You Do and Say to Help?

Offer unconditional support: Let your teen know you are there to listen and support them without judgment.

Encourage seeking therapy: Help them find a mental health professional who can work with them on coping strategies.

Be patient: Overcoming self-harm is often a gradual process. Show consistent care and empathy as they work through their emotions.

Next Steps When Seeking Help

- **Encourage professional help** but avoid forcing it. Continue to offer support and be persistent if initial attempts to get help (e.g., through a GP or mental health service) are unsuccessful.
- **Educate yourself** about self-harm to better understand your teen's experiences and how to support them.
- **Build a support network**, including family, friends, and professionals who can help both you and your teen.

The Role of Schools

- Open communication with schools is key. Informing school staff can ensure they are equipped to provide support.
- Teachers and counsellors can offer emotional support and create a safe space for your teen to talk. Encourage your teen to talk to a trusted teacher or counsellor.
- Work together with the school to ensure that your teen feels safe and supported in the school environment.

Resources for Further Support

There are many sessions on the [Let's all Talk Mental Health hub](#) for you to view on self-harm and related issues, including the talks linked below.



Helping a Teen who selfs Harm



How is your teen affected by self harm

1. Free App from Stem4 Charity: <https://calmharm.stem4.org.uk/>
2. Blog: How do I get my teenager to listen to me? <https://bit.ly/teenslistening>
3. National Self Harm Network - List of distractions: <https://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads/Distractions.pdf>
4. A guide for school staff - Young people who self harm - <https://bit.ly/ypwsh>
5. Guidelines for staff Within school and residential settings - Self Harm <https://bit.ly/dshoxford>
6. Shout: Text "SHOUT" to 85258
7. Papyrus: HOPELINEUK 0800 068 4141
8. Samaritans: Call 116 123

Key Takeaways:

1.

Self-harm is a coping mechanism.

2.

Supporting a teen who is self-harming is challenging but possible with patience, understanding, and professional guidance.

3.

Teens can move past self-harm with the right support and time. You are not alone—there are resources available to assist you and your teen.

4.

Open communication and patience are essential in helping your teen.

5.

Professional help and healthy coping strategies can significantly improve your teen's ability to manage emotions and reduce self-harming behaviours.