

Self-harm: What is it?

Self-harm is the intentional act of tissue destruction to one's own body with the purpose of shifting overwhelming emotional pain to a more acceptable physical pain without the intention to die.

Forms of Self-harm

- cutting i.e. wrists, arms, thighs, abdomen (most common form)
- burning
- excessively picking scabs
- punching self
- inserting objects under skin
- pinching
- biting self
- ingesting harmful substances

Background Information

Many people are unaware of the prevalence of self-harm behaviours. In reality, 15-20% of teens in middle to high school engage in self-harm activities. For example, the average age to begin cutting is 12-15 years old.

When a person is involved in cutting, there are usually other underlying issues. These may include:

- depression and/or anxiety
- substance abuse
- eating disorders
- defiant behaviours

Resources

Child & Adolescent Mental Health	
Crisis Services	780.427.4491
Intake	780.342.2701
Distress Line available 24/7	780.482.help (4357)
Addictions Services Intake	780.422.7383
Edmonton & Area Child & Family Services Crisis Unit (Abuse and Neglect)	780.422.2001 or 780.427.3390 after hours
Sexual Assault Centre of Edmonton	780.423.4102
Kids Help Phone	1.800.668.6868
Health Link Alberta	780.408.link (5465)
Canadian Mental Health Association	www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-1036
Interdisciplinary National Self-Injury in Youth Network Canada (INSYNC)	www.insync-group.ca
Self Injury	www.selfinjury.com
WebMD	www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/self-injury
FirstSigns	www.firstsigns.org.uk/

Health Link Alberta

Call toll free:
1-866-408-LINK (5465)
Edmonton: 780-408-LINK



Information about Self-harm

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Why Self-harm?

Not everyone who self harms comes from a difficult background. Some teens who take part in self-harm behaviour are functioning well academically and socially and have caring home environments. In general, self-harm is a coping strategy for getting quick relief from emotional pain and distress.

Intentional self-harm is usually for more than one reason.

For example

- to feel something
- to gain a reaction/ attention from someone
- to punish self
- to feel relaxed
- to avoid something, i.e. school, people, punishment
- to mimic others, i.e. celebrities, fictional characters, peers
- as a cry for help

Positive Alternatives

- squeezing ice
- bite into a lemon, or chew gingerroot
- slap a table top
- snap rubber band on wrist
- engage in a healthy activity—walk, yoga, bike
- read a book
- call a friend
- play favourite music

what you can do to help

Do . . .

- try to approach in a caring way
- have non-judgmental compassion for their experience
- accept him/ her even though you may not accept the behaviour
- understand that this is a way of coping with the pain he/she feels inside
- show a respectful willingness to listen
- consistently enforce consequences – positive and negative
- model responsible use of nicotine, alcohol and medications
- learn your child's triggers and therapeutic tools
- ask for feedback on parenting from child

Don't . . .

- be overly reactive as this could alienate them and damage your relationship
- respond with panic, revulsion, shock, or averted gaze
- try to stop the behaviour with threats or ultimatums
- show excessive interest in the self-injurious behaviour
- talk about it in front of peers
- tell them that you will not tell anyone if they discuss it with you
- put too much pressure on child about school and extra-curricular activities

Self Harm versus Suicide

Similarities

- conflicted interpersonal relationships
- bulky clothing
- refusal to take part in activities that require a change of clothing
- evidence of self harm or emotional distress in writing or art

Although there are similarities among self-harm and suicidal behaviours, there are significant differences:

	Self Harm Behaviours	Suicidal Behaviours
intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • escape from psychological distress • create change in self or environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • end life • escape unbearable psychological pain
severity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • high
behaviour frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to several times per week • often long term and repetitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • low frequency, 1-3 times
number of methods used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • multiple methods used across episodes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • typically one method only
mental state during self-harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • distressed, yet hopeful • difficulty implementing adaptive problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hopelessness • helplessness • inability to problem solve
Consequences/ Aftermath		
internal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of relief, calm • temporarily reduced stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • frustration • disappointment • increased distress
external	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reiection. criticism from others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • care and concern from others