

Self-Injury In Adolescents



- Self-injury is the act of deliberately harming body tissue, at times to change a way of feeling.
- The reasons for self-injury vary. Some adolescents self-injure to take risks. Others injure themselves out of desperation or anger, to seek attention, to show their feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, or because they have suicidal thoughts.
- There are often underlying causes for self-injury. An evaluation by a mental health professional may assist in identifying and treating these causes.

Self-injury is the act of deliberately harming body tissue, at times to change a way of feeling. Self-injury is seen differently by groups and cultures within society. The behavior has become more common lately, especially in adolescents. The causes and severity of self-injury can vary. Some forms may include:

- Carving
- Scratching
- Branding
- Marking
- Burning/abrasions
- Cutting
- Biting
- Head banging
- Bruising
- Hitting
- Tattooing
- Excessive body piercing
- Picking and pulling skin and hair

Some adolescents may self-injure to take risks, rebel, reject their parents' values, state their individuality, or merely be accepted. Others may injure themselves out of desperation or anger, to seek attention, to show their feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, or because they have suicidal thoughts. These adolescents may suffer from serious psychiatric problems such as depression, psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and bipolar disorder. Additionally, some adolescents who engage in self-injury may develop borderline personality disorder as adults. Some young children may resort to self-injurious acts from time to time but often grow out of it. Youth with developmental delays and/or autism spectrum disorder as well as adolescents who have been abused or abandoned may also show these behaviors.

Why Do Adolescents Self-Injure?

Self-injury is a complex behavior and symptom that results from a variety of factors. Adolescents who have difficulty talking about their feelings may show their emotional tension, physical discomfort, pain, and low self-esteem with self-injurious behaviors. Although some teenagers may feel like the steam in the pressure cooker has been released following the act of harming themselves, others may feel hurt, anger, fear, and hate. The effects of peer pressure and contagion can also influence adolescents to injure themselves. Even though fads come and go, most of the wounds on the adolescent's skin will be permanent. Occasionally, teenagers may hide their scars, burns, and bruises due to feeling embarrassed, rejected, or criticized about their physical appearance.



Wheeler

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What Are The Warning Signs For Self-Injury?

Self-injurious behaviors can be difficult to detect. Adolescents usually keep them a secret. Wounds can often be treated at home and covered with clothing or jewelry; however, some wounds can result in infection if left untreated. A person who is concerned about a family member or friend can look for frequent unexplained injuries and clues like bandages in trash cans. They can watch to see if the teenager wears appropriate clothing for the weather. An adolescent who is self-harming may wear long pants or sleeves to cover their injuries, even when it's hot.

Most people find out that a teenager is self-injuring from the youth themselves. The adolescent will disclose their self-harming behavior to a friend or sibling.

Is An Adolescent Who Self-Injures Suicidal?

Not everyone who self-injures is suicidal. The only way to know is to ask. If they express any suicidal thinking, get them connected with a mental health provider. Concerned family and friends can also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for advice.

What Can Parents And Teenagers Do About Self-Injury?

Parents are encouraged to talk with their teenagers about respecting and valuing their bodies. Parents should also serve as role models for their teenagers by not engaging in acts of self-harm. Some helpful ways for adolescents to avoid hurting themselves include learning to:

- Accept reality and find ways to make the present moment more tolerable
- Identify feelings and talk them out rather than act on them
- Distract themselves from feelings of self-harm (for example, counting to ten, waiting 15 minutes, saying "No!" or "Stop!," practicing breathing exercises, journaling, drawing, thinking about positive images, using ice and rubber bands)
- Stop, think, and evaluate the pros and cons of self-injury
- Soothe themselves in a positive, non-injurious way
- Practice positive stress management
- Develop better social skills
- Seek out positive sources of support and avoid online websites and support groups that promote self-injury

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Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/DMHAS

CT Department of Children and
Families
www.ct.gov/DCF
United Way 2-1-1
www.211ct.org or call 2.1.1

National Resources

National Institute of Mental
Health (NIMH)
www.nimh.nih.gov

National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
1.800.273.TALK (8255)

