

## Self-Harm

- ⇒ Approximately 2 million cases are reported annually in the U.S.
- ⇒ 90 percent of people who engage in self-harm begin during their teen or pre-adolescent years
- ⇒ Nearly 50 percent of those who engage in self-injury activities have been sexually abused
- ⇒ Most common methods:
  - Skin Cutting (70-90%)
  - Head banging or hitting (21%-44%)
  - Burning (15%-35%)

## Overview

Self-Harm is the act of deliberately harming your own body, such as cutting or burning yourself. It's typically not meant as a suicide attempt. Rather, this type of self-injury is a harmful way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger and frustration.

When someone self-injures, they do not intend to die. Young people who self-injure may do so as a method to cope with stress– hurting themselves is often seen as a way to control their upsetting feelings. Others do so to dissociate from their problems (e.g. to distract themselves from emotional pain).

Other motivations for why teens may self-injure include:

- *To reduce anxiety/tension*
- *To reduce sadness and loneliness*
- *To alleviate angry feelings*
- *To punish oneself due to self-hatred*
- *To get help from or show distress to others*
- *To escape feelings of numbness (e.g. to feel something)*

While self-injury may bring a momentary sense of calm and a release of tension, it's usually followed by guilt and shame and the return of painful emotions.

Most frequently, the arms, legs and front of the torso are the targets of self-injury, but any area of the body may be used for self-injury. People who self-injure may use more than one method to harm themselves.

## Signs and Symptoms

- *Scars, often in patterns*
- *Fresh cuts, scratches, bruises, bite marks or other wounds*
- *Excessive rubbing of an area to create a burn*
- *Keeping sharp objects on hand*
- *Wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather*
- *Frequent reports of accidental injury*
- *Difficulties in interpersonal relationships*
- *Behavioral and emotional instability, impulsivity and unpredictability*
- *Statements of helplessness, hopelessness or worthlessness*

## Forms of self-injury

- *Cutting (cuts or severe scratches with a sharp object)*
- *Scratching*
- *Burning (with lit matches, cigarettes or heated, sharp objects such as knives)*
- *Carving words or symbols on the skin*
- *Self-hitting, punching or head banging*
- *Piercing the skin with sharp objects*
- *Inserting objects under the skin*

## Risk factors

Certain factors may increase the risk of self-injury, including:

- **Having friends who self-injure.** People who have friends who intentionally harm themselves are more likely to begin self-injuring.
- **Life issues.** Some people who injure themselves were neglected, were sexually, physically or emotionally abused, or experienced other traumatic events.
- **Mental health issues.** People who self-injure are more likely to be highly self-critical and be poor problem-solvers. In addition, self-injury is commonly associated with certain mental disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders.
- **Alcohol or drug use.** People who harm themselves often do so while under the influence of alcohol or recreational drugs.

# Treatments

Treatment options for those who self-injure may include one (or a combination) of the following:

- *Psychotherapy or "talk therapy"*
- *Medication*
- *School supports*
- *Maintaining a healthy, regular daily routine*

## How Do I Get Help?

If you're injuring yourself, even in a minor way, or if you have thoughts of harming yourself, reach out for help. Talk to someone you trust — such as a friend, loved one, mental health professional, spiritual leader, or a school counselor, nurse or teacher

### When a friend or loved one self-injures

- **Your child.** You can start by consulting your pediatrician or other health care provider who can provide an initial evaluation or a referral to a mental health professional. Express your concern, but don't yell at your child or make threats or accusations.
- **Preteen or teenage friend.** Suggest that your friend talk to parents, a teacher, a school counselor or another trusted adult.
- **Adult.** Gently express your concern and encourage the person to seek medical and mental health treatment.

### When to get emergency help

If you've injured yourself severely or believe your injury may be life-threatening, or if you think you may hurt yourself or attempt suicide, call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.

Need help getting connected to a professional? Email [counseling@breakdownstl.org](mailto:counseling@breakdownstl.org) for assistance.

#### Sources:

\* Teen Mental Health - <http://teenmentalhealth.org>

\* Mayo Clinic - <https://www.mayoclinic.org>

\* Mental Health America - <https://www.mhanational.org>

\* Healthy Place for Your Mental Health - <https://www.healthyplace.com>