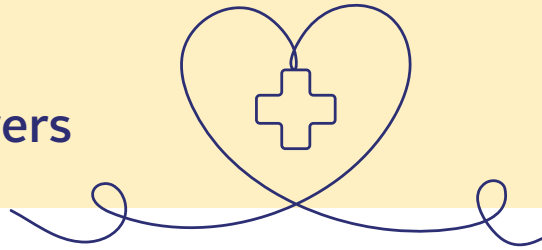
Self-harm in adolescents:
Information and tips for parents and caregivers



Discovering that your child is engaging in self-harming behaviors, also known as non-suicidal self injury (NSSI), can create a range of emotions, including, guilt, shame, anger, sadness or shock. This handout aims to provide parents and caregivers with information about maladaptive coping skills, guidance on addressing concerns with their child and tips for seeking additional support.

What is self-harm or non-suicidal self injury (NSSI)?

Self-harm, or non-suicidal self injury (NSSI), is the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue resulting in immediate damage, without suicidal intent and for purposes not culturally sanctioned (this does not include tattoos or body piercings unless done with intent to harm).

Self-injury can include a variety of behaviors but is most commonly associated with:

- Intentional carving or cutting of the skin
- Subdermal tissue scratching
- Banging or punching objects or oneself with the intention of hurting oneself
- Embedding objects under the skin

Some other signs include:

- Cut or burn marks on arms, legs and/or abdomen
- Discovery of hidden razors, knives, other sharp objects or rubber bands (which may be used to increase blood flow or numb the area)
- Spending long periods of time alone, particularly in the bathroom or bedroom
- Wearing clothing inappropriate for the weather, such as long sleeves or pants in hot weather

The Cornell Research Program on Self Injury and Recovery has created resources for parents and caregivers that offer guidance and support. Below are a few suggestions on how to approach your child about this issue:

- Address the issue as soon as you can
- Use your concern in a constructive way
- Validate your child's feelings, not the behavior
- If your child isn't ready to talk, don't apply pressure

What should I say?

Parents and caregivers often don't know what questions to ask and are fearful of saying the wrong thing. Remember, how something is said is just as important as what is said. Tone, facial expressions and body language are essential in creating a safe environment where someone feels comfortable enough to discuss personal struggles. To help parents or caregivers initiate this conversation, here are a few guiding questions:

- "What's been weighing on you lately? Is there any way I can support you?"
- "What could I do to help you feel more supported by me?"
- "If you're not ready to talk about this, that's okay. I'm here whenever you are. Would you rather I check in again, or do you want to come to me when you're ready?"
- "Can we walk through what was happening leading up to the self-harm—like what was going on around you, what you were thinking and what you were feeling?"
- "How does self-injury help you feel better?"
- "What's it like for you to share this with me?"

Using validation as a skill

Take your child seriously by really listening to their concerns and validating their thoughts and feelings. Validation is a powerful skill for parents because it helps children and teens feel understood, safe and emotionally secure — especially during hard moments.

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3 reasons why parents should validate their child's thoughts and emotions:

1. It calms the nervous system

- When a child feels heard and understood, their brain shifts out of "defense mode."
- Validation lowers emotional intensity and makes problem-solving possible.
- If a teen feels dismissed ("that's not a big deal"), emotions often escalate.
- If they feel understood ("that makes sense you'd feel that way"), they calm faster.

2. It strengthens the relationship

Validation communicates:

- "I see you."
- "Your feelings make sense."
- "You're not alone."

Kids who feel validated are more likely to:

- Open up in the future
- Share struggles earlier
- Trust their parent during bigger issues



Once someone feels heard, they're more open to guidance.

3. It reduces power struggles

- Invalidation often leads to arguing, shutting down or escalating.
- Validation doesn't mean agreeing — it means acknowledging the feeling.

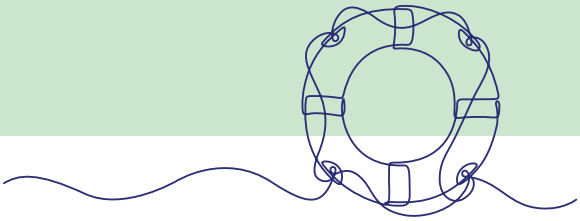
  For example:

  Unhelpful: "You're overreacting."

  Helpful: "I can see this really upset you."

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Seeking out support



After opening up the lines of communication, parents should aim to work with their child collaboratively to find a therapist that will best meet their needs. Communication should focus on partnership and not pressure. We listed some suggestions below:

1. Lead with curiosity, not control

Start the conversation from a place of concern and care—not urgency or fear.

Try: "I've noticed you've been dealing with a lot lately, and I care about you. I'm wondering if having someone outside the family to talk to might help."
"What do you think about talking to a therapist to get more support?"

2. Offer choices whenever possible

Collaboration increases buy-in.

Offer appropriate options:

- In-person or virtual therapy
- Male or female therapist
- Younger or older provider
- Individual therapy or skills-based group (like dialetical behavior therapy, also known as DBT)

You might say: "Would you feel more comfortable talking to someone in person or online?"
"Do you want to help looking at therapist bios together?"

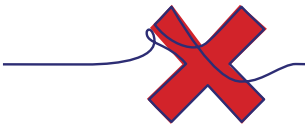
3. Normalize therapy and reduce shame

Be clear that therapy is not a punishment.

Try: "Therapy isn't because you're in trouble—it's because you deserve support."
"Lots of people talk to therapists when they're dealing with intense emotions."

What should I avoid saying or doing as a parent or caregiver?

The following behaviors can increase your child's self-injury behaviors:



- Yelling
- Lecturing
- Put downs
- Harsh and lengthy punishments
- Invasions of privacy (i.e., going through your child's bedroom without his/her presence)
- Ultimatums
- Threats

As parents and caregivers, it is essential to **avoid power struggles.** *Ultimately, you cannot control another person's behavior, so applying pressure and making demands will likely be unhelpful.*

For more information and tips for parents, please visit the following guide created by the Cornell Research Program on Self Injury and Recovery.

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