

## Cutting and Self-Harm Self-Injury Help, Support, and Treatment

### Understanding cutting and self-harm

Cutting and self-harm are often ways to express deep distress and cope with painful memories. And although you may want to stop, you may not know how to begin. Understanding why you self-harm can be a vital first step toward your recovery. If you can figure out what function your self-injury serves, you can learn other ways to get those needs met—which in turn can reduce your desire to hurt yourself. Once you better understand why you self-harm, you can learn ways to stop self-harming.

### Myths and facts about cutting and self-harm

Because cutting and other means of self-harm tend to be taboo subjects, the people around you—and possibly even you—may harbor serious misconceptions about your motivations and state of mind.

#### Myth: Self-harm is a suicidal act.

- **Fact:** Although people do die from self-harm, these instances are accidental; in general, self-harmers do not want to die. In fact, self-injury may be a way of coping, of regaining control of pain—in order to go on living.

#### Myth: People who self-injure are crazy.

- **Fact:** Those who self-harm are usually dealing with trauma, not mental health problems. There are exceptions, but by and large, you are probably trying to cope with problems in the only way you know how.

#### Myth: Injuring yourself is a cry for attention.

- **Fact:** Friends, family, and even some misinformed healthcare professionals may think that if you hurt yourself, you are seeking attention, but the painful truth is that people who self-harm generally try to hide what they are doing—rather than draw attention to it—because they feel ashamed and afraid.

### Self-harm and your emotions

You may find yourself more likely to self-harm after an overwhelming or distressing experience, or series of experiences. It's possible that you never learned how to identify or express difficult feelings in a healthy way. Understanding your emotions and how they may make you want to self-harm can be another important step toward recovery.

## Emotional reasons behind cutting and self-harm

When emotions feel out of hand and you can't cope with your pain, you may turn to cutting yourself or other self-harm.

Self-harm may be how you:

- **Regulate strong emotions.** If you are experiencing high stress, self-harm may—temporarily—calm your nerves.
- **Distract yourself from emotional pain.** You may feel emotionally “numbed” by past traumas and need a way to force yourself into feeling something.
- **Express things that cannot be put into words.** Self-harm may be the only way you know how to display anger or deep sadness because you have not learned alternate coping skills.
- **Exert a sense of control over your body.** You may imagine that hurting yourself will prevent something worse from happening.
- **Self-punish or express self-hate.** You may have a childhood history of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and erroneously blame yourself for it. Self-harm can be a way to punish yourself.
- **Self-soothe.** You may not know any other means to calm intense emotions.

## Common emotional traits of self-injurers

Although everyone's story is unique, if you cut or self-harm, chances are you have certain emotional issues in common with other self-harmers.

- **Magical thinking.** You may believe that your physical wounds prove your emotional pain is real, or that if you harm yourself, no greater harm will come to you.
- **Growing up in a family where emotions weren't allowed.** You may have been discouraged from expressions of anger while growing up, and as a result be unsure what to do with strong feelings.
- **Other emotional problems.** You may have co-existing problems with obsessive-compulsive disorder, substance abuse, depression, or an eating disorder—all conditions primarily about control.
- **Limited support.** You may have a limited social support network, perhaps due to family breakdown or shame about your self-harm.

### In Your Own Words

It can be difficult to understand the motivations behind cutting and self-harm, even when it's your own. But a clearer picture may develop when you hear the common explanations people give for self-injury:

- “It **expresses emotional pain or feelings** that I'm unable to put into words. It puts a punctuation mark on what I'm feeling on the inside!”
- “It's **a way to have control** over my body because I can't control anything else in my life.”
- “I usually feel like I have a black hole in the pit of my stomach, at least if I feel pain **it's better than feeling nothing**.”
- “I feel **relieved and less anxious** after I cut. The emotional pain slowly slips away into the physical pain.”

### Signs and symptoms of self-injury

Because clothing can hide physical injuries, and inner turmoil can be covered up by a seemingly calm disposition, self-injury can be hard to detect. Due to deep shame and guilt, self-harmers often go to great lengths to keep their injuries a secret. As a family member or friend, it may be up to you to be on the lookout for the warning signs of self-harm—and to talk to the person about getting help. Red flags for cutting or self-injury include

- **Unexplained wounds.** A self-harmer may have fresh cuts or scars from cuts, bruises, or cigarette burns, usually on the wrists, arms, thighs, stomach or chest.
- **Indications of depression.** Low mood, tearfulness, lack of motivation, or loss of energy can be signs of depression, which may lead to self-injury.
- **Frequent “accidents.”** Someone who self-harms may claim to be clumsy or have many mishaps, in order to explain away injuries.
- **Changes in eating habits.** This could mean being secretive about eating, or unusual weight loss or gain, as eating disorders are often associated with self-harm.
- **Covering up.** A person who self-injures may insist on wearing long sleeves or long pants, even in hot weather.

**Cutting and Self-harm** is a serious habit and just like any habit, it can be broken. If any of this information resonated with you, please get help. You will be trading one coping skill for a healthier one.