

Self-Harm

What is it?

Self-harm is hurting yourself on purpose. It is not an effort to commit suicide. Self-harm is also known as self-injury, self-mutilation, or self-inflicted violence. Teens who harm themselves come in all genders, races or ethnicities, states, and economic backgrounds. More females than males hurt themselves.

There are many reasons people hurt themselves. Some teens do it to try to stop feeling lonely, angry, or hopeless. It is their coping mechanism for dealing with feelings they can't handle. Some teens who hurt themselves have low self-esteem, feel unloved by their family, or think they have no friends. Some also have an eating disorder, an alcohol or drug problem, or may have been victims of physical or sexual abuse. In fact, the majority of females who self-harm have been physically or sexually abused.

Teens who hurt themselves often keep their feelings "bottled up" inside and have a hard time letting their feelings show. Some teens who hurt themselves say that feeling pain gives them a sense of relief.

Some Ways People Hurt Themselves

There are many forms of self-harm, including:

- Cutting with knives, razor blades, broken glass, or anything sharp
- Carving
- Branding/Marking
- Banging your head against a wall or hard object
- Breaking bones

- Burning your skin or rubbing it until you have abrasions
- Biting yourself
- Biting your nails until they bleed
- Hitting
- Picking or pulling skin and hair
- Not allowing old cuts to heal
- Self-strangulation

Why do people hurt themselves?

Sometimes people don't really know why they hurt themselves. Others do it for a lot of different reasons, including:

- Relief from psychological pain
- To calm down when feeling out of control
- To release tension
- Not being able to feel emotionally, and wanting to feel something
- Feeling too much
- To express anger or hurt.

Get Help

If you are harming yourself, get help. Talk to an adult or someone your own age who you trust. Check in your community for a support group for teens who self-harm or for similar groups. Even though you might feel alone, there are people who understand you and can help you understand yourself. If you don't know who to talk to, contact the National Center's confidential services at **1-800-FYI-CALL** or **gethelp@ncvc.org**.

Help Yourself

There are options you can use instead of hurting yourself. They make you feel discomfort, without actually injuring you. They might help you break the cycle of hurting yourself. Some of these options

come from sources listed at the end of this document—many were suggested by people who used to hurt themselves and have stopped.

When you feel like you need to hurt yourself, you might want to:

- Wrap a rubber band (loosely) around your wrist and “snap” it against your skin.
- Talk to someone.
- Hold some ice cubes in your closed mouth for as long as you can stand it.
- Squeeze your ear lobe between your finger and thumb.
- Make a list of your feelings.
- Ask a friend to write things they like about you. Keep this list somewhere you can find it when you need it.
- Hold your arms in front of you for as long as you can bear.
- Take a cold bath (Not a hot bath—scalding water can kill).
- Listen to music. Turn up the volume if it helps.
- Throw plastic bottles at a wall or kick a ball.
- Punch or kick something that won’t hurt you (or it!).
- Draw a picture of the wound you want to create.
- Squeeze the inside of your nose between your nostrils with your finger and thumb.
- Use a red marker on your skin if you feel like you need to see blood.
- Go for a walk or a run, swim, or lift weights.
- Do yoga.
- Try relaxation breathing techniques.

Help Someone Else

If you know someone who is harming him or herself, you can:

- Listen to them and take them seriously.
- Remember that you can’t solve the problem for your friend, but you can encourage them to talk to an adult or a professional who can help them.
- Do not be critical of your friend’s behavior. Accepting your friend and showing concern can help them feel cared about and safe.

If You Want to Know More about Self-Harm...

[A Bright Red Scream](#) (Merilee Strong)

[Bodily Harm: The Breakthrough Healing Program for Self-Injurers](#) (Karen Conterio and Wendy Lader, Ph.D.)

[Cutting: Understanding and Overcoming Self-mutilation](#) (Steven Levenkron)

[Cut](#) (Patricia McCormick)

[The Scarred Soul: Overcoming and Ending Self-Inflicted Violence](#) (Tracy Alderman)

www.mirror-mirror.org

www.mosaicminds.org

This document was developed under grant number 2002-X1678-DC-WT from the Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) of the U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions and views expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Office of Violence Against Women of the U.S. Department of Justice. This document may be reproduced only in its entirety. Any alterations must be approved by the Dating Violence Resource Center. Contact us at (202) 467-8700 or dvrc@nvc.org.