

Helping Youth Who Self-Harm

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Objectives

Participants will learn:

- ✓How to define self-harm (or Non-suicidal Self-Injury – NSSI) and some of the statistics related to this
- ✓Reasons teens self-harm and ways to better understand this behaviour
- ✓Tools to help you stay calm when you find out your teen has self-harmed
- ✓The importance of regulating your own emotions in order to co-regulate with your teen

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What is Self-Harm/NSSI?

Self-Harm/Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) refers to purposely inflicting damage on the body, in the absence of lethal intent, and not socially sanctioned

- Sometimes people will refer to other behaviours as self-harm (e.g. substance use, disordered eating), and while these behaviours are harmful and self-destructive, they are not the same.
- Rates of adolescents engaging in NSSI range from 1.5 to 6.7% in community samples; and in psychiatric samples, prevalence rates are as high as 60% for single-incident NSSI and around 50% for repetitive NSSI (Brown & Plener, 2017)
- NSSI is most common among adolescents and young adults; average age of onset is between 12 and 14 years.

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Common ways of self-harming:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1. Cutting | Interference with wound-healing |
| 2. Head-banging | Pinching |
| 3. Extreme scratching | Puncturing |
| 4. Punching/Hitting | Biting |
| 5. Burning | Extreme skin-picking |
| | Ingesting dangerous substances
(e.g. bleach) |
| | Breaking Bones |

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Why do Teens Self-Harm?

There are many reasons people engage in self-harming behaviour. Some individuals will struggle to explain why they engage in this behaviour, so here are some possibilities (Van Dijk, 2021):

- A way of punishing self
- Provides relief from your current situation or emotion
- Distracts from emotional pain
- Communicates to others that you need help
- Lets you feel something other than “numb”
- Shows your desperation to others (i.e. it's proof of how bad things are)
- Creates pleasure: peace, calm, or even joy or euphoria
- (Attempt to change others' behaviour)
- Proves you're not invisible
- Makes you feel in control
- Validates emotional pain
- Is a way of avoiding suicide

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What To Do When you find out your teen has self- harmed



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Step One: Don't Freak Out!

Take a deep breath and
use other skills to
regulate yourself

Remember that talking
about self-harm will NOT
cause self-harm

Validate, validate, validate
(we'll talk more about
this, don't worry!)

Offer support and caring

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Validation

What is validation?

- Communicating that the person's responses make sense and are understandable; or communicating acceptance of the person and their responses
- Not "shoulding", judging, discounting or minimizing



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Why validate?

- *Invalidation* increases emotional arousal, which makes it difficult for individuals to process information
- Validating someone who is emotionally aroused (e.g. "I know you're angry") helps to reduce the intensity of emotions and is soothing

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How to Validate

- Only validate the valid! - e.g. validate the extreme emotional response that led to the problematic behavior ("It's so hurtful when your friends exclude you, and you don't know what else to do with those intense feelings")
- Question: how might you validate your teen when they tell you they've self-harmed?

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Distress Tolerance Skills

Skills to help you (and your teen) re-regulate

F-TIP Skills:

1. Forward Bend (activates PNS)
2. "TIP" the temperature of your face (mammalian dive reflex)
3. Intense exercise
4. Paced Breathing (PNS)

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Improve your self-care: **STRONG**

Sleep: Balancing it!

Treating physical and mental health problems as prescribed

Reducing (or eliminating) drugs and alcohol

One thing daily to build mastery

Nutrition: Balance it!

Getting exercise

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Distress Tolerance Skills

Help your teen brain-storm and make list of Distress Tolerance Skills:

What do they do already to cope in more effective ways?

What else could they be doing?

** These skills will help you as well as your teen!

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Distress Tolerance Skills

Distracting Skills: (ACCEPTS)

Activities (e.g. TV, reading, walking, Zentangle)

Contribute to others (e.g. volunteer, do something kind for someone else)

Comparisons (e.g. to others, to yourself)

Emotions (e.g. TV, music)

Pushing Away (e.g. with imagery – e.g. Container)

Thoughts (ie. Generate neutral thoughts, such as counting, singing a song, etc.)

Sensations (e.g. take a bath, elastic band, ice)

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Distress Tolerance Skills

Self-soothing with the 5 Senses:

1. Sight (e.g. flowers, clean room)
 2. Hearing (another person's voice, nature, music)
 3. Touch (e.g. clean sheets, pets)
 4. Taste (e.g. herbal tea, a favourite food, mint)
 5. Smell (flowers, perfume, etc.)
- Helpful during a crisis, and also as general self-care
 - Note that some people over-use this; others feel guilt and so tend to avoid self-soothing; the challenge with both instances is to help the client find balance.

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Distress Tolerance Skills

Dialectical Abstinence:

- While eliminating self-harm is the goal, typically individuals won't be "perfect" at it; they will have lapses.
- When lapses happen, the idea is to radically accept ("it is what it is, we can't go back and change it"), and then get back on track as quickly as possible (rather than ruminating, self-judging, triggering shame, etc.)

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