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Counsellors' Corner

Helping Youth Who Self-Harm

What Is It and Why Do They Do It?

Self-Harm/Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI)

- Refers to purposely inflicting damage on the body, in the absence of lethal intent
- 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.

Common Ways to Self-Harm

- Cutting, extreme scratching, puncturing, burning, extreme skin-picking, ingesting dangerous substance, punching self, head banging, breaking bones, pulling hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes out.

Why do teens self-harm?

- A way of punishing self
- Proves you're not invisible
- Provides relief/distracts from your current situation or emotion
- Makes you feel in control
- Validates emotional pain
- Communicates to others that you need help; Shows your desperation (proof of how terrible things are)
- Lets you feel something other than "numb;" creates pleasure: peace, calm, or even joy or euphoria.
- Can provide a sense of inclusion; if a group of teens is experimenting with self-harm, we will often see copy-cat behaviour within the peer group.
- As a last-resort method to avoid going down the path of suicide.
- Many people who self-harm experience dissociation; cutting is the quickest way for them to "ground" themselves (or bring themselves back into reality).
- Self-harm provides a similar euphoria/dopamine release to the brain as opioids.
- Self-harm can become an addiction; like all other addictions, cannot just easily be "turned off" with willpower.

What To Do As a Parent

- **Do not Panic**
 - Take a deep breath and use other skills to regulate yourself
 - Remember that talking about self-harm will NOT cause self-harm
 - Validate your teen – hear their emotions
 - Offer support and caring – **The last thing your teen needs is an angry parent.**
 - Maintain neutrality – our teens will notice your emotions. Avoid shock, surprise, shaming, or pity responses
 - Assess the medical needs of the self-harming behaviours with care; if the wounds are minimal, don't assume that the feelings are. Focus on the feelings more than the wounds (if youth isn't in danger).
- **Validate, Validate, Validate**
 - Validation is communicating that the person's emotions and attempts at coping were what they felt they needed to do in the moment. You accept the person and their responses. NO "shoulding", judging, discounting, or minimizing. Shaming will likely increase the negative emotions and potentially increase the self-harming. It will also decrease the likelihood of your child communicating honestly with you.
 - If we ignore, it increases the negative emotions
 - If we validate, it helps to reduce the intensity of emotions and it can provide comfort. When we name the emotion, the brain releases a calming chemical, and the intensity is reduced.
 - An example of validation: "It makes you angry when your friends leave you out and you have these intense emotions. You felt like you needed to do something with these intense emotions and hurting yourself was the only option at the time; have I got that right?"
- **Communication**
 - Ask your child, "Do you know what is driving the self-harm? What makes it increase? What helps it decrease?" Be Curious. Respect that sometimes your child just might not know.

- **What NOT to do**

- Do not assume that self-harm is synonymous with suicidality.
- Do not expect them to stop overnight or in a short period of time
- Do not react strongly emotionally
- Do not make them promise not to do it
- Do not make them feel responsible for their self-harm
- Attempt to punish/consequence to stop self-harm. You cannot discipline self-harm out of your child.
- Do not try to fix it on your own. Your job as a parent is to support your child's emotions, ask, "Is there anything I can do to help support you?" and be an ear to listen.

- **Remember to....**

- Remain calm and curious
- Listen and validate
- Attend to any medical needs
- Communicate and co-regulate
- Access help as needed – School Counsellor, Community Counsellor, doctor

What Can I Do To Help Myself If I Am The Youth Self-Harming?

- **Distress Tolerance Skills**

- Forward Bend – activates the parasympathetic nervous system (calms the body)
- "TIP"
 - Temperature of your face – put face in 10 degrees cold water for 30 sec (eye, nose, mouth)
 - Intense Exercise – 20 mins
 - Paced Breathing – Square Breathing, Straw breathing, have the exhalation be longer than the inhalation.

- **Improve Self-Care**

- Restorative Sleep (without a screen)
- Treat physical and mental health problems
- Reduce or eliminate alcohol or drug use
- Strengthen a strength – build mastery
- Nutrition & Exercise
- Evaluate the impact social media is having on mood and self-esteem
- Make an appointment to see a therapist. The Foundry is a great local resource! (250) 338-7341

- **Distracting/Self-Soothing Skills (ACCEPTS)**

- Activities (eg drawing, Zen tangles)
- Contribute to others – be a helper
- Comparisons to others/self
- Emotions – Netflix/music
- Pushing Away – with imagery
- Thoughts – generate neutral thought
- Sensations- bath, shower, icepacks

Information for this edition sourced from:

- On-line workshop by Sheri Van Diji <https://learn71.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Helping-Youth-Who-Self-Harm.pdf> (For slides of information summarized in article)
- On-line workshop by <https://bcacc.ca/event/helping-teens-who-cut-a-mind-matters-free-public-workshop/>
- Counsellors' Corner: Bridget Mawhinney B.Sped., M.Ed., and Tara Ryan B.Ed., M.Ed., RCC
- "Emma" - A personal perspective of a 19-year-old female with a history of trauma and self-harm (interviewed in May 2022 by Bridget Mawhinney & Tara Ryan). Sourced with permission 2022.

Where To Get Help:

- **The Foundry (non-emergency):**

- <https://foundrybc.ca>
- 1-833-FOUNDRY (that's FOUNDRY with a zero!) or 1-833-308-6379 to book an appointment.
- Go to foundrybc.ca/get-support/virtual for the most updated hours on this new service
 - Foundry offers young people ages 12-24 health and wellness resources, services and supports – online and through integrated service centres in communities across BC.

- **Kids' Help Phone (24/7):**

- Text CONNECT to 686868
- www.kidshelpphone.ca

- Offers professional counselling, information and referrals, and volunteer-led, text-based support to young people in both English and French.
- **Youth Crisis Line**
 - 1-888-564-8336 or text 250-564-8336
 - Trained peer support
- **Crisis Line Association of BC (24/7)**
 - 1-800-SUICIDE (1-800-784-2433)
 - <http://www.crisislines.bc.ca/>
 - <https://crisis-centre.ca/faqs/>
 - Call if you are considering suicide or are concerned about someone who may be.
- **Youth In BC: Chat (12pm - 1am)**
 - <http://youthinbc.com/>
 - Toll Free (24/7): 1-866-661-3311
 - Youth In BC is a program within the Crisis Centre that connects youth with support information and resources
- **Youth Against Violence Line (24/7):**
 - 1-800-680-4262
 - text (604) 836-6381
 - email info@youthagainstviolenceline.com
 - Provides 24/7 live help line where youth can talk one-on-one, in confidence and anonymously to a support worker, in whatever language you feel most comfortable speaking in.
- **Bullying Canada:**
 - Toll Free 1-877-352-4497
 - www.bullyingcanada.ca
 - A bullying support service run by youth for youth, providing phone and online chat and resources
- **Erase Bullying:**
 - www.erasebullying.ca
 - Information on cyber bullying, signs of bullying, videos, resources; opportunity for parents and youth to report bullying.
- **Mental Health & Addictions:**
 - www.heretohelp.bc.ca
 - Website of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information, working together to help people prevent and manage mental health and substance use problems and live a healthier life
- **Indigenous Crisis Support**
 - 1-800-588-8717 or 1-250-723-2040
 - KUU-US Crisis Line, available 24/7 to provide support to Indigenous people in BC
- **Alcohol & Drug Information & Referral Service**
 - 604-660-9382 or toll-free 1-800-663-1441
 - Worried about drug & alcohol use? Whether it's for yourself or someone you care about, you can call the Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service for information, options, and support
- **Psychosis Sucks**
 - <http://www.psychosissucks.ca>
 - The Fraser Out Early Psychosis Intervention (EPI) Program website. This site promotes early detection, education about psychosis, and provides direction for seeking help.
- **ReachOut Psychosis**
 - <http://www.reachoutpsychosis.com/>
 - A program for youth which takes information about how to spot and get treatment for psychosis as early as possible so they can help their friends get help early though a fun and interactive concert tour.
- **Teen Mental Health**
 - www.teenmentalhealth.org
 - An evidence based site providing a wide range of educational materials and tools in various formats designed to meet the mental health care and information needs of young people, parents, teachers, and other educators and health care providers.
- **Mood (non-emergency)**
 - bouncebackbc.ca
 - Free online and phone counselling program to manage low mood, mild to moderate depression, anxiety, stress or worry for ages 15 and up.



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