

Information Sheet for Parents about Self-Harm

Teens may self-harm for a variety of reasons including wanting to feel release, self-punishment, to gain a sense of control, and coping with (or expressing) emotional distress.

Triggers may include shame, stress, guilt, intrusive thoughts, pressure at school, family or friendship conflict, anxiety, stress, depression, self-esteem struggles, substance use, and isolation.

Self-harm can be addictive: when a body is injured (including self-harm injuries) the brain releases dopamine (the reward hormone) and endorphins to compensate for pain, creating a chemical balance where harm has induced a positive release.

General Protective Factors

Activities: engaging in hobbies and activities which stimulate and provide routine can be helpful as it connects with goals, increases self-esteem, is meaning-making, and reduces boredom (sometimes boredom can increase anxiety/intrusive thoughts).

Acknowledge wins: celebrating accomplishments and growth.

Basic needs: When a teen is overwhelmed, sometimes going back to basics can be beneficial; movement, rest, fresh air, having a meal, drinking a glass of water, getting dressed for the day, taking a shower, having a conversation, etc. We often underestimate how much having basic needs met can help shift and regulate moods.

Check-ins: including having conversations which are general 'feeling' updates to see how someone is doing (and self-harm is not mentioned).

Communication, transparency, and reassurance (especially around feelings/conflicts/high stress times): everyone copes differently; some need space and quiet or prefer to be around others, and sometimes those things are needed at different times. Teens may internalize guilt and/or shame if there is quiet or silence after a stressful time or conflict, especially if they have a tendency towards internalizing such feelings. Even if they have not done anything 'wrong,' they may infer punishment and feel guilt. A check-in and reassurance that they are loved and supported while being transparent and explaining how an individual (whether a friend/sibling/parent, etc.) might need time to process their own feelings can be beneficial.

Safe spaces: providing a non-judgemental environment for the safe expression of feelings is important. Such a space can be created by providing validation for teens' emotions, speaking in calm and soothing tones, offering reassurance, and asking open questions.

Language: be mindful of language around self-harm as teens may feel shame or stigma around self-injury; it is important to use neutral language when talking about it. It's okay to express concern, but we can do so gently. I've included sample questions on the next page.

Connection & support: family, friends, peers, community support, pets, resources, etc.

Coping skills: learning techniques that help to express and regulate emotions can increase distress tolerance (examples include: breathing techniques, movement, mindfulness, etc.)

Resources: therapy, using apps (Calm Harm), and school supports (guidance counsellor)

Sample Questions:

“How do you feel before/during/after you self-injure?”

“What brings up those feelings for you?”

“What are your triggers?”

“What do you wish we could change about your stress or trigger?”

“What helps to reduce urges?”

“How does self-injury help you feel better?”

When brainstorming solutions: “What could we try together?”, “What could you try?”

“How can I best support you?”

Alternative Self-Harm Strategies & Coping Techniques

- Deep breathing (Box Breathing: 4 second inhale, 4 second hold, and 4 second exhale);
- Exercise (releases endorphins and helps regulate in a positive way);
- Spending time outside;
- Sour candies, spicy food, or a cooling food (like mints) helps provide a distraction;
- Ice cube or an ice pack on the area where the teen self-harms (it gives a stinging sensation which helps them replicate a similar sensation to self injury, but in a way that is less harmful);
- Taking a cold shower (decreases cortisol (the stress hormone), increases mental clarity, and can be a grounding technique);
 - Alternatively, getting warm and cozy can be soothing and grounding (changing into pyjamas, being wrapped in a warm blanket, drinking a hot beverage such as tea or hot chocolate);
- Expressing emotions (through writing, talking, having a good cry, etc.);
- Spending time with others and connecting with supports;
- Positive distraction (favourite movie/tv show, music, activity, etc) can be helpful as silence can be too triggering when urges are high;
- Accessing resources if needed.

Safety Planning can include:

Safety proofing: removing (easy) access to tools such as box cutters, scissors, razors and knives during high(er) stress times.

Having a plan: in case of an emergency, reviewing a plan to let you know if they need support or services, having a crisis number easily accessible, accessing CHEO, going to a hospital for support, calling 9-1-1

Resources

Supports for Parents

Parent's Lifeline of Eastern Ontario (613) 321-3211 or 1-855- 775-7005

<https://www.cheo.on.ca/en/resources-and-support/resources/P4926E.pdf>

<https://childmind.org/article/quick-facts-on-self-injury/>