

SELF-HARM



A Guide for Youth, Families, Educators, Human Service Workers

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Published in partnership with: **Orchard Human Services, Inc.**, a 501(c)3 nonprofit. www.OrchardHumanServices.org

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the precious and brave friends, family, students, and clients who showed me, through their personal experience, how to understand, recognize, respond, and have compassion for individuals who engage in self-harming, also sometimes referred to as self-mutilation.

Introduction



Self-harming is a widespread problem in our fast-paced and ever-changing society. Many young individuals grapple with emotional, social, and psychological challenges that can seem too heavy to bear. Those who care about a person who self-harms search frantically to find reasons for, and make sense of, this self-destructive behavior. Youth who engage in self-harm struggle to feel peace, happiness, and acceptance in a complex and painful world. Most importantly, they are looking for help!

Perhaps you feel or have felt the urge to harm yourself; or maybe you have a child, friend, or student who self-harms. This can feel devastating, and you may feel lost and need help navigating through the frustrating and complex situation. You

need to find information that you can understand. You need access to resources to find help.

This book is written for those who want to understand self-harming among children and adolescents. You'll learn the reasons behind the behavior, steps to manage the problem, and ways to recover from what can become an extremely destructive cycle.

The motivation for writing this guide was a desire to provide a tool for young people who self-harm. These teens and young adults need something to share with family and friends as they self-disclose and reach out for help. If you are a young person who self-harms, please read this book. Share it with your family, friends, and teachers. Use the resources at the back to find support. You are worth it!

If you care about someone who self-harms, please read this book and share it with others. Use it as a tool to raise awareness. Use this book to initiate a non-judgmental dialog with the person who is self-harming; or, use this book to start an open and honest conversation with the youth's parents, family, or teachers of the youth who you believe is in trouble.

Self-harming can be difficult to understand, both for the young person who engages in it and also for those who care about him or her. Unfortunately, this is a subject that is often ignored by

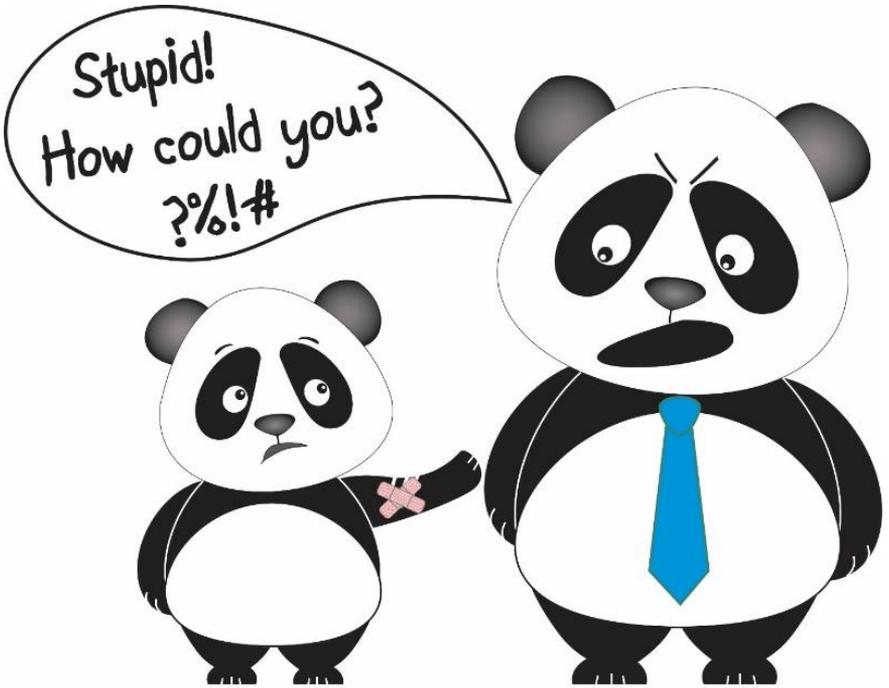
the media. The many forms of self-harming are still treated as 'taboo' and remain relatively unspoken.

The truth is that young people are hurting. Our frenetic media places overwhelming pressure on our youth to be smart, attractive, trendy, and witty. The positive messages that youth need to learn have to do with valuing their individuality, personal integrity, and self-compassion. Regrettably, media and social influences tend to stress the negative aspects of self-image without giving much attention to ways to build up our youth to be emotional healthy and mentally strong. Celebrities are only recently emerging with their own self-harming stories, highlighting this serious problem. The rise in self-harming behavior is the product of a societal imbalance, and mental health services are being stretched more each year to meet its growing demands.

While there may not be a simple cure for what ails the individual who self-harms, there is information and help. This guide to self-harming explains the phenomenon and provides some practical ways to respond when you or someone you love self-harms.

The most important thing to understand initially is that self-harming *can* be treated. Qualified mental health and psychoeducational experts are available for you to contact and

thus begin the process of recovery; however, they cannot help if they do not know about the problem. Overcoming - or helping someone overcome - self-harm begins with the first step: coming forward. I encourage you to do that today.



STOP!
Yelling, coaxing, blaming, and begging don't help.
Self-harming is a real and complex mental health issue that requires professional care.

Letter to Family, Friends, Teachers, Community

Dear Loved One,

When you do any of the following things to try to handle me and my self-harming, it hurts me. Please stop!

- ✓ *Bargaining*
- ✓ *Begging*
- ✓ *Coaxing*
- ✓ *Controlling*
- ✓ *Disciplining*
- ✓ *Giving the 'silent treatment'*
- ✓ *Hiding*
- ✓ *Hurting*
- ✓ *Ignoring*
- ✓ *Negotiating*
- ✓ *Pleading*
- ✓ *Punishing*
- ✓ *Pushing*
- ✓ *Screaming*
- ✓ *Threatening*
- ✓ *Wailing*

- ✓ *Withdrawing*
- ✓ *Yelling*

Self-harming is a serious mental health issue that requires professional care. All of the actions on this list only make things worse for me. When you do these things, I want to hurt myself even more.

Please read this book so you have a better understanding of what is going on with me. I want to understand it, too. I want to work out our relationship, but I need your help. Using this guide can do that for me right now. I'm sharing it with you because I care and I want to get well. After you read this, please support me and make sure I get professional help from someone qualified to treat self-harming behaviors. We both need me to stop.

Love,

Young Person Who Self-Harms

What is Self-Harming?



Self-harming is a serious disorder that requires professional help. Put a stop to self-harming today, and contact an experienced professional for help.

Self-harming is a term used to describe activities involving inflicting wounds or other injuries on one's own body. The reasons for self-harming are complex. Some youth self-harm as a way to self-punish. Others are seeking relief from potentially overwhelming emotional or mental pain or anguish.

Research has shown that the body experiences emotional or mental pain over the same neural networks as physical pain. The suffering of a young person with emotional or mental

challenges can be just as intense as pain from an injury or accident. Self-harming triggers a biochemical response, that is a chemical response in the body, to help relieve pain and produce a sense of relief.

The body releases neurotransmitters in response to the self-harming activity; these neurotransmitters can offer some temporary relief from emotional and mental anguish. When the self-harming behavior involves cutting or carving, then the act is referred to as self-mutilation. Other examples of self-mutilation include: intentional bruising and/or burning, huffing, and tearing or puncturing the skin. All self-harming behaviors are unhealthy, dangerous, and even life-threatening.

Cutting or carving involves puncturing the skin in some way with a sharp object, such as a razor blade or knife blade; although, some youth will cut with any object available, including shards of broken glass. Sometimes a youth will tear his or her skin, or pull out hair, and sometimes the youth will burn his or her own skin. The harm can be in small patches or across wide areas of the body. For example, a youth might pull out clumps of hair along the scalp line or across the entire head. Burns may be limited to areas that are covered by clothing or may be more widespread. Any type of self-harming, even in limited areas of the body, require professional care and attention.

In addition to the psychological and emotional harm these behaviors produce, the physical wounds inflicted can lead to blood loss and infection, which can be life-threatening. For this reason, some youth may require medical as well as mental health support to recover from self-harming behaviors.

Eating disorders involve a complex set of behaviors and include anorexia and bulimia. A young person may refuse to eat, then binge and purge (force themselves to vomit), and/or take laxatives or diet pills. Eating disorders are grave and potentially life-threatening behaviors that can cause malnutrition, tooth erosion due to repeated exposure of enamel to stomach fluids from regular purging, and even failure of the heart or organs.

Warning signs of an eating disorder include bingeing with weight loss, refusal to eat, using excessive amounts of laxatives or diet pills, and small, calorically-limited meals that will not sustain life. Typically, young people with this type of self-harming behavior are secretive about their condition, but some youth will openly discuss the desire to self-harm. You might notice a consistent avoidance of food and any discussion of topics involving eating. They might prefer to eat by themselves. You might also notice sudden and frequent trips to the restroom, and sounds of vomiting, as associated with purging. In the case of binge eating,

there are often excessive amounts of food containers in the trash can.

Any eating disorder requires specialized care because unlike problems with alcohol or cigarettes, one cannot completely eliminate food from one's life. Instead, those with these types of disorders must learn healthy eating habits and establish healthy eating behaviors on a regular, daily basis. This treatment plan requires complex, professional support.

Huffing is the intentional inhalation of harmful chemicals to get a rush, buzz, or feeling of euphoria. A youth might also swallow harmful substances to get high, even ingesting large amounts of common food items, such as vanilla extract, because of the high alcohol content. Many substances can be huffed, sniffed, or otherwise consumed to produce this euphoric feeling.

Self-mutilation comes in many forms, usually involving socially unacceptable activities and behaviors. For example, piercing one's earlobes is a customary practice in the U.S. and is generally excluded from this category, but some body piercings are on the fringe of unconventional social behavior. This book does not attempt to qualify what is socially appropriate and what is not; instead, it focuses on behaviors that are clearly outside this scope.

Why Does a Youth Self-Harm?



Self-harm is the result of a youth feeling overwhelmed with negative thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, and looking for ways to alleviate the associated pain. Although this unhealthy choice is not a solution to the problem, sometimes self-harming is the only way the individual can cope.

Self-harming is sometimes the only way a young person feels he or she can exert any degree of control in a crazy and unpredictable world. The feeling of power resulting from self-harm can soothe a young person who feels that life is completely unmanageable. Categories of youth who are at greater risk for self-harm include: disabled youth, children of abusive parents,

and those who live in abusive environments. Teens, adolescents, and young adults alike are affected.

Some self-harming behaviors produce a rush of chemicals that lead to a feeling of being excited or high. Cutting, for example, releases dopamine into the brain, which in turn causes a euphoric sensation. A young person who is severely anxious, sad, stressed, or depressed might turn to such a self-harming behavior to achieve temporary relief. All chronic self-harming behaviors are process addictions. The process addiction may stand alone or be accompanied by other addictions, which may include substance use disorders as well. For example, a young person who cuts could develop a secondary addiction to a substance like alcohol.

Self-harming is almost invariably an issue concerning the youth, him- or herself, rather than about others. When in distress, these young people turn to highly destructive behaviors to gain momentary escape from painful emotions and stress. As such, the professional response to this behavior must be careful, planned, and comprehensive in order to cast a wide enough net to help end the self-harming behavior and begin exploring alternative solutions to life's many challenges.

Where Do I Go for Help?



Self-harm is the result of intense emotional, mental, and/or psychological pain and despair.

Many of the following types of professionals have received qualified training in the area of self-harming:

- Addictions Counselor
- Clergy Member or Ministerial Counselor
- Clinical Social Worker
- Counselor
- Marriage and Family Therapist
- Psychologist
- Psychiatrist
- School Counselor
- School Psychologist

However, you should actively seek out an expert with specialized training and experience specifically working with young people who self-harm. If you choose to work with a clergy member, such as a Ministerial Counselor, be sure the person has clinical mental health training beyond spiritual studies. Strictly religious or spiritual training might not qualify a professional to work with youth who self-harm, and could lead to more serious mental health or safety problems.

Many professionals regularly offer information sessions for potential clients and sometimes offer free or low-cost consultations; these present valuable opportunities for you to ask questions about various counseling, intervention, and treatment

options. Additionally, a list of references and other valuable resources you can use to begin your search for a professional can be found in the Index at the back of this guide.

How Do I Choose the Right Professional?

Choosing the right person to treat the young patient is critical. It is important that he or she feels comfortable with the specialist or other qualified professional in order to establish trust, which is essential for recovery. (Is choosing the right professional just as important as the loved one/teacher/parent who is helping the youth? Any additional reasons it is important?)

Interview several professionals. Ask detailed questions, discuss relevant concerns, and take notes to review later so that you can compare the different approaches. When choosing a care provider for a self-harming youth, look for the following: experience; success with other youth who used to self-harm; training and education; using a scientific method that is documented to work; an ethical approach does not harm anyone (including the youth who self-harms); a sense of real caring and commitment; office proximity to allow for consistent and frequent appointments; and the ability to create a meaningful connection and rapport with the young person.

If the professionals have similar approaches, and all feel uncomfortable to you, then consider that you may just be new to this type of approach. Give it a chance. Focus on the outcome of the approach. Will it help the young person take back control of

his or her life? Will it move the young person away from the self-harming behavior? Remember that the current parenting and family environment has not cured the self-harming problem, so be willing to support the professional in trying something new.

If you discover that the professionals' approaches are all different, talk with each about your concerns with the styles of treatment. Choose the professional who seems most appropriate for the situation and with whom you are comfortable. (What if the loved one isn't confident in the decision and second-guesses whether he/she is right?)

Speak with the young person's pediatrician, family physician, or primary care provider. The family doctor can often provide insight to help guide your decisions to ensure medical safety and suitability. He or she may even provide trusted referrals or other support options.

If possible, discuss your concerns with the young person's guidance counselor or school psychologist. These professionals typically have specialized training to respond to self-harming and can provide useful information and advice? referrals.

What If I Do Not Agree with the Professional's Approach?

Treatment for self-harming requires a critical set of clinical skills and an awareness that allows the professional to support the youth in regaining control from a self-harming behavior. As such, not all professionals take the same approach when working with self-harming behaviors. You may be surprised by the method that the professional adopts because it is necessarily different from the typical relationship between family and friends. The client-counselor relationship is critical and much more important than the relationship between the professional and the young person's family or friends.

Becoming informed about self-harming behaviors and the methods used to treat them is a powerful tool for family, friends, and educators of youth who self-harm. The resources at the end of this guide can provide additional information; you can find local mental health and nonprofit agencies that offer training and education for families and friends of youth who self-harm. Your local health department can also direct you to appropriate community resources. Alternatively, contact the United Way at 2-1-1 to locate a means of help.

If you feel uncomfortable with a professional's approach, ask yourself these questions:

- Is the young person who self-harms comfortable with this professional?
- Do you see emotional and/or physical progress in the young person?
- Has the young person engaged in creating a safety plan with the professional?
- Has the frequency or intensity of the self-harming decreased?
- Can the professional identify ways in which the young person is healing or experiencing therapeutic benefit from care?

If you still have reservations about whether you've chosen the right professional for your situation, contact other professionals in the same and/or different areas of specialization. The *Where Do I Go for Help* section in this guide lists several who typically work with self-harming.

What About In-Patient Treatment Facilities?

Some young people who self-harm require more focused and intensive care to heal than can be effectively given in an out-patient setting. An in-patient facility might be the best option for help if you have serious concerns that someone you know has a plan to end his or her life, or harm another person. If this is the case, STOP and CALL 911 immediately; do not wait to do this. The 911 operator is trained to handle situations like this, and together you can create a quick and effective plan to get help.

If you feel that the situation is urgent and cannot wait for a scheduled counseling appointment, go to the nearest emergency room or in-patient mental health facility; medical professionals will perform an intake evaluation and begin creating a treatment plan to help the self-harming individual.

If you are unsure about whether an in-treatment facility is appropriate for your situation, and the young person is not in immediate physical danger, then contact a mental health professional IMMEDIATELY (does this mean to schedule an emergency appointment as soon as possible?) and let the professional walk you through the proper steps. (Contact the professional immediately if the physical threat isn't present? Is it okay to leave the youth alone until an appointment can be scheduled?)

Myths and Truths About Self-Harm



Being truthful with oneself and professionals is crucial on the path to healing and recovery.

MYTH: *Young people self-harm to lash out at, get back at, or seek revenge on others.*

TRUTH: Self-harming uses nonproductive and dangerous behaviors as coping mechanisms to deal with perceived overwhelming life challenges, stress, and emotional pain. These youth need support and professional guidance to develop effective and mature alternatives for managing and responding to personal struggles.

MYTH: *Self-harming is a way for young people to get attention and manipulate others.*

TRUTH: Most young people who self-harm are secretive about self-harming behavior. Youth who cut, for example, may wear long sleeves or long pants (even in summer) to hide self-inflicted wounds. Self-harming behaviors, including self-mutilation and eating disorders, are typically associated with deep shame and intense emotional and psychological suffering. Please respond to self-harming behavior in a respectful way that recognizes the deep pain of the young person and focuses on getting professional support to work toward recovery.

MYTH: *Self-harming is a form of intentional misbehavior.*

TRUTH: Self-harming is a serious emotional and behavioral problem; it is not a form of disobedience. Young people who self-harm are responding to inner challenges and pain that they are otherwise unable to handle. These individuals require professional support to resolve inner conflict, develop effective life coping skills, and establish healthy behaviors that support their mental and physical health and wellbeing.

MYTH: *Young people who self-harm just need stricter parenting and more discipline.*

TRUTH: Stricter parenting is neither a recognized treatment nor solution for self-harming. When parents of youth who self-harm adopt a more stringent approach to discipline, they face the risk of aggravating the underlying problem that initially led to the self-harming. Self-harming is a serious problem that requires professional care; parents can support the healing process, but no amount of strict parenting is going to replace professional treatment of self-harming behaviors.

References & Valuable Resources

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Non-Internet Resources

If you do not have access to the Internet, you have options:

- Dial 911 for emergency services.
- Call your local police department.
- Contact the United Way by dialing 211. If 211 does not work in your area, call United Way's national phone line directly at (703) 836-7112.
- Call Lifeline Crisis Chat, which is a national coalition of crisis outreach and intervention agencies and providers, by calling 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Additional non-internet resources for mental health support include:

- Your family physician, the young person's pediatrician, or primary care provider
- A community mental health center
- Local hospitals and emergency rooms
- Your health insurance company, which may have a list of mental health providers covered by your insurance plan

About the Author



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is the founder of [Orchard Human Services, Inc.](#), a 501(c)3 nonprofit human services organization that serves through

Uplifting Lives by Counseling, Educating and Caring!

She specializes in promoting healing, growth, and development for individuals who experienced a disruption or interruption of attachment development. A national presenter, Clinical Mental Health Counselor, Exceptional (Special) Educator, and Parent and Teacher Trainer, her work represents a unique blending of the areas of psychology, brain-based learning, and human development.

Please Look for These & Other Titles

Dead Children Can't Read

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski

Develop-Meant

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski & Linda Berman

Developmental Justice

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski & Dr. Kathy A. Thomas

Marmalade Jam

Book 1 in Marmalade Jam Therapeutic Series

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski

Juno's Butter Knife

Book 2 in Marmalade Jam Therapeutic Series

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski

Marmalade Jam – Companion Coloring Book

Illustrated by Kara Hayden

Raising Social Children

By Darleen Claire Wodzinski