



Self-Harm

What is Self-Harm?

In 2014, self-harm was the cause of 25% of hospitalizations for youth in Canada. This reflects a growing trend of youth being admitted to hospital because of self-harm injuries (67% increase from 2010). The most common self-harm behaviour resulting in hospitalization was self-inflicted poisoning, followed by using sharp objects for females, and hanging or strangulation for males.¹ Other self-harm behaviours include burning, reckless driving, binge drinking, and hitting oneself.² It is important to note that self-harm behaviours are not typically associated with suicide.³ Self-harm behaviours are most common in youth and young adults.ⁱⁱⁱ

A common belief is that self-harm is an attempt at suicide, but this is typically not the case. Reasons that people engage in self vary but common reasons are to help cope with strong emotion, loss, trauma, or difficulty; turn emotional pain into physical, to feel “real” emotions as opposed to emptiness or numbness, to regain control, or to feel better.⁴

Risk Factors: ⁱ

- **Traumatic experiences:** self-harm can be used as a way to distract someone from flashbacks or painful memories
- **Poor coping skills:** difficulty handling intense emotion can a desire to release pent-up emotion
- **Teenage females:** while both male and females engage in self-harm, it is most typically found in teenage females

What to look for: ^{iv 5}

As people engaging in self-harm behaviour can be secretive, it can be difficult to know whether someone we love is self-injuring. People who self-injure are typically not seeking to end their own lives; however, it is possible that accidental death may occur as a result of self-harm behaviours. Below are a few indicators that someone may be self-injuring:

- **Frequent accidents:** explaining away injuries with “clumsiness” or “accidents”
- **Unexplained scars, wounds, burns:** typically found on inner thighs, wrists, arms, and chest
- **Blood stains:** on clothing, towels, bed sheets, blood-soaked tissues.
- **Sharp objects:** concealing and carrying around sharp objects (e.g. razors, needles, knives, etc.)
- **Covering up:** wearing too many clothes for the season, e.g. wearing a turtleneck in the heat of summer

- **Extended periods** of being alone: particularly in bathrooms or bedrooms
- **Isolation and irritability:** a marked change in typical behaviour

How to help Friends and Family Struggling with Self-Harm⁶

Self-harm behaviours can sometimes be dismissed as attention-seeking without recognizing the pain that the person is going through. It is important to remember that each person handles situations differently and that there may be part of a person's story that is unknown. In order to help someone who is

- Be **supportive** of your friend or family member. Do not make accusations and try to maintain a sense of normalcy instead of being hyper-vigilant.
- Ask him or her, **"How can I help?"** Do not be afraid to talk to your friend about their behaviours.
- **Recognize** their struggle. It may not make sense to you, but they are hurting.
- **Do not try to minimize** the behaviour.
- **Do not compare** what you think you would do and what he or she is doing.
- **Show your care and concern** through phone calls, kind notes or other outward expressions of care.
- Be **patient**. We may feel a sense of urgency for our loved ones to stop an unhealthy behaviour, but demanding immediate change and imposing expectations can do more harm than good.
- Be **careful with your words**. Some people may refer to self-harm as "self-mutilation," but this is unhelpful and can be seen as insulting, and may act as a barrier for them to continue seeking support from you.
- **Keep calm**. A natural response to a loved one hurting him or herself can be to panic. This is unhelpful as it cuts off dialogue. Keeping calm will create the safety that they need to start the road to seeking help.
- **Encourage** them to seek help.

What does the Bible say about self-harm?

The Bible offers hope for the hurting. Those in pain are invited to take their cares, worries, and concerns to God (1 Peter 5:7). He promises to trade beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and peace for despair (Isaiah 61:3). The pain may seem insurmountable and there can be a lot of confusion but the hope that Christ offers remains the same. God responds to our pain as we cry out and does not neglect or turn away from us (Psalm 22:24), even though we may feel that he is far. God is faithful to carry out his promises, and he has promised to never leave you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Treatment⁷

Self-harm can often be connected with underlying difficult emotions. They can be triggered by a variety of events that make coping difficult. Part of treatment for self-harm includes:

- **Identifying and managing triggers** to self-harm behaviour (e.g. trauma, relational stress, etc.)
- Learn **coping skills** to manage distress (e.g. journaling, art, listening to music, etc.)
- Learn to **regulate emotions** (e.g. identifying, discussing and processing emotions, etc.).
- Improve **self-image** (e.g. changing negative self-thoughts to healthier, more realistic thoughts).
- Improve or develop **communication and social skills** (i.e.
- Develop healthy **problem-solving skills** (i.e. helping to face and solve problems without internalizing)

For more information or counselling support, please contact:

Christian Counselling Services

<http://www.saskatoonccs.com/>

(306) 244-9890

chcounselling@sasktel.net

¹ Canadian Institute for Health Information. (n.d.) *Intentional Self-Harm Among Youth in Canada*.

² Lancione, M. (2014). Why self-harm? [web log post] Retrieved from <http://healthymindscanada.ca/selfharm/>

³ No author (2015). *Self-Harm*. [web log post] Retrieved from <http://www.goodtherapy.org/learnabouttherapy/issues/selfharm>

⁴ Canadian Mental Health Association (n.d.) *Youth and Self-Injury*. Retrieved from http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/youthandselfinjury/#.Vva5PArLcs

⁵ Smith, M., Segal, J., & Shubin, J. (2016). *Cutting and self-harm: How to feel better without hurting yourself*. Retrieved from http://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/cuttingandselfharm.htm#how_1

⁶ No author. (n.d.) *Family and Friends*. Retrieved from: <http://www.self-injury.org/friends.html>

⁷ Mayo Clinic Staff (n.d.) Self-injury/cutting. Retrieved from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseasesconditions/selfinjury/diagnosistreatment/treatment/txc20165488?p=1>