

## Cutting: What Parents and Guardians Need to Know

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### What is Cutting?

Cutting is the most common form of self-injury among older children and adolescents. Self-injury is any deliberate act that causes physical harm to a person's own body without suicidal intent. Other forms of self-injury can include burning, scratching, wound picking, banging head or punching walls/hard objects.

### Why Do Youth Cut Themselves?

Youth use cutting as a coping mechanism to help them deal with their emotional pain or distress. In most cases, it offers an immediate relief from things like psychological pain, unbearable tension, loneliness, depression, anger, absence of feeling, or numbness. Cutting is their way of calming themselves.

### Finding out That Your Youth Self-Injures

It is normal to feel a mixture of emotions when discovering that your youth is self-injuring. It is important to not overreact or panic, and realize that you and your youth are not alone. Although cutting is a maladaptive coping strategy, it is not necessarily suicidal behaviour. It is generally due to a lack of skill in managing one's feelings. Young people often struggle with a variety of stressors involving school, relationships, and home life. It is important to focus on the underlying issues behind your youth's self-harm.

### Treating Youth who Self-Injure

**It is important that if your youth self-injures that they see a mental health professional.** Although cutting offers immediate relief, it is only a short term solution; the underlying emotional issues are still present. If these issues are not dealt with, over time it may lead to thoughts of suicide.

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**If you feel that your youth is at risk for suicide, seek urgent medical assistance. Call 911 or visit the nearest Emergency Department**

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There are no specific medications for the treatment of self-injury; however medication may be used to address symptoms of depression, anxiety and/or impulsivity. Other aspects of treatment/intervention may include working around identified stressors, improving relationships and increasing levels of support.

## Helping a Youth or Teen Who Self-Harms

- ✓ While your youth is recovering from self-injury, there are many ways in which you can support him or her:
- ✓ Let them know that you care. Do activities together, go for a walk, or watch their favourite movie with them.
- ✓ Listen to and accept their feelings. Remember that they may be feeling very stressed and upset. Allow them to open up to you in their own time.
- ✓ Do not draw attention to their injuries as this may cause them to feel embarrassed and be more secretive.
- ✓ Be aware that many of the scratches and cuts can be treated at home with basic first aid. If the injury is more serious (requiring stitches or infected) seek out medical attention.
- ✓ Encourage your youth to talk about their stressors and their self-harm to somebody they trust (parent/ family/friend/teacher etc.) Offer support and be non-judgmental.
- ✓ Depending on the situation, assist your youth in finding professional help. Support attendance at therapist/doctor appointments.
- ✓ Remember to take care of yourself. Do not be afraid to seek out extra support.
- ✓ Along with your youth, brainstorm some suggestions that are healthier alternatives to self-harm. Some examples include:
  - Do an active activity: Go for a walk, play with a pet, work-out, hit a pillow, rip newspaper or magazines, dance, smash play-doh etc.
  - Do deep breathing exercises, muscle relaxation exercises, massage, or have a warm bath.
  - Read a book, draw, colour, or write in a journal.
  - Listen to soothing music.
  - Develop a coping box filled with objects that are safe and healthy to sooth and manage distress (i.e. pictures, movies, puzzles, magazines, treats, books, etc.)
- ✓ Recognize that you are not to blame for your youth's self-injury but be mindful of the areas in your relationship with them that may require strengthening in their eyes.

## What Not To Say or Do

- ✗ Avoid using guilt trips as they make your youth feel guilty or ashamed. Refrain from showing disgust or anger about their behaviour. Making them feel bad about themselves may cause a lack of trust in you.
- ✗ Do not demand or expect them to "just stop" self-harming. It can be dangerous to take away their only coping mechanism before they have learned healthier ways to cope.

## RESOURCES

- Family Physician
- School Counsellors
- EAP or private insurance
- Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services in your area:
  - **Pathways for Children and Youth (Frontenac, and Lennox & Addington Counties)** - [www.pathwayschildrenyouth.org](http://www.pathwayschildrenyouth.org)
  - **Kinark Child and Family Services (Northumberland County)** - [www.kinark.on.ca](http://www.kinark.on.ca)
  - **Open Doors for Lanark Children and Youth** - [www.opendoors.on.ca](http://www.opendoors.on.ca)
  - **Children's Mental Health Services of Hastings and Prince Edward Counties** - [www.cmhs-hpe.on.ca](http://www.cmhs-hpe.on.ca)
  - **Children's Mental Health of Leeds & Grenville** - [www.cmhlg.ca](http://www.cmhlg.ca)

## OTHER RESOURCES

### Online:

- Children's Mental Health Ontario: [www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca)
- Mental Health Helpline: [www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca](http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca)
- Self-Injury Canada (INSYNC): <http://www.insync-group.ca>
- Canadian Mental Health Association: <http://www.cmha.ca>
- Kids Help Phone: [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

### Phone Numbers:

- Kid's help line: 1-800-668-6868
- Kingston Crisis Line: 613-544-4229
- TeleHealth: 1-866-797-0000
- Mental Health Helpline: 1-866-531-2600

### Books:

- Helping Teens Who Cut – Understanding and Ending Self-Injury, Michael Hollander
- When Your Child Is Cutting - A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Overcome Self-Injury, Merry E. McVey-Noble, Sony Khemlani-Patel, & Fugen Neziroglu.
- Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens, Sheri Van Dijk
- Stopping the Pain: A workbook for teens who cut and self-injure, Lawrence Shapiro