

Self-harm in children and adolescents

Self-harm is behaviour without a conscious and purposeful intent to die that results in damage to bodily integrity. It is often a symptom of psychological distress.

Self-harm is not a diagnosis. It may be a way for an individual to cope with strong, unpleasant feelings, tension or stress, but it may also be a tool of control (e.g. over their body) or punishment, a way of communication, or it may even be a tool for the child to get in touch with themselves.

It's normal to be afraid of the idea of someone hurting themselves. If you notice signs of self-harm in your child, it can be difficult to open up the topic. It's important to take an interest in the situation and start taking steps to get the help needed.

There are various forms of self-harm, the most common include cutting oneself, burning oneself, swallowing medicine, picking at wounds, biting oneself or pulling out hair. Self-harm can be used by a child to deal with challenging life situations, the most common of which include:

- pressure at school or at home
- bullying
- low self-esteem
- experiencing difficult feelings, depression, anxiety, hopelessness
- stress

- relationship breakdown or difficulties
- confusion in the area of sexuality
- money worries
- abuse (physical, sexual or emotional)
- illness or a health problem
- difficulties in the family

How to recognize self-harm in your child

Detecting self-harm can be difficult because people usually harm themselves in private and do not talk about it in public. On the other hand, some teens want to show what they are doing to others and talk openly about it, which can be intimidating. Here are some signs that might indicate that a child or teen is harming themselves.

Behaviour:

- inadequate clothing – e.g. long sleeves in summer, sweatbands, wristbands
- avoiding activities that require exposure - e.g. sports, bathing or PE at school
- having prepared answers to targeted questions
- spending time alone, isolating
- withdrawing from previously favoured activities
- unpredictable, impulsive behaviour
- carrying strange items (e.g. razor blades)
- visibly stressed but calm and relaxed in private after a while

Physical signs:

- scars, burns, scratches
- use of bandages, plasters
- bruises
- pulled out hair

Emotions:

- emotional instability
- irritability
- helplessness, hopelessness
- depression, anxiety
- feelings of guilt and/or shame



Remember: Children and adolescents often use self-harm as a way to cope with difficult feelings or situations. If they could, they would cope differently, but for some reason, they can't do it any other way at that particular time, and self-harm is their only tool to provide relief from their hardships. If you feel that your child is just using this to seek attention, there is usually a good reason for this and so it's important to address such behaviour and offer support for the child.

When looking for support, you can use the information in **Where to seek for help for children and adults.**

You can also find more information here:
www.sebevrazdy.cz.



How you can help your child

If you suspect that your child is self-harming, it is important not to ignore the situation, but it is also not advisable to try to resolve it straight away.

- Try not to panic or overreact.
- Try not to judge.
- Realise it's not possible to convince or force your child to stop it straight away.
- Talk with your child – the timing and the setting are important (e.g. without anybody else interfering, with plenty of time to talk)
- Offer help with looking for support (a school psychologist, a therapist...)
- Name what you see, express your concerns and emphasize the availability of help.
- Let your child know you are there for them, try to be empathetic.
- Remind your child of their good qualities and the things they are good at.
- Ensure your child that you love them, that you care for them and are willing to support them.