

Is Your Child Self-harming?

In the past we have written articles about moody and angry teens, about how to manage exam stress, commitments and a crisis. Most of what we write refers to everyday families struggling with and managing everyday stuff. For this article, however, we are going to look at something a little more worrying and likely to cause more distress. This is the issue of self-harm and about how to know when you should really worry.

In Australia, leading child and adolescent psychologist, Michael Carr-Gregg, reports that as many as 12 per cent of our young people self-harm, and more teenage girls engage in this practice than boys. Cutting is the most common, but not the only form of self-harm. Others may scratch, burn, bang their head or body against hard surfaces, pull hair or bite. Mostly done in secret, these practices, when discovered by parents, can be confronting, alarming, confusing and totally mystifying. The young persons themselves often experience intense guilt and shame at their own behaviour, and knowing how it will distress their parents, try to hide it.

As hard as it may seem to be to understand, most young people will tell you that this deliberately inflicted harm helps them to cope with overwhelming emotions or to distract them from emotional pain. Furthermore, albeit a maladaptive way to cope, it does seem to work for many of them and as a result is at risk of becoming a repeated and even an addictive behaviour.

There is much useful information written on this subject and we will list some good resources for your further reading at the end of this article, but the most pressing questions we are most often asked are, 'How can I know if my child is at risk?', 'What sign should I look for if my child is self-harming?' and 'What can I do about it?'

Whilst no one is immune, risk factors are similar to those of other mental illnesses and include:

- Suffering from a mood or anxiety disorder.
- Having experienced a trauma while growing up.
- Feeling pressures at school or at work.
- Using drugs or alcohol.
- Experiencing tensions within the family.
- Knowing friends who engage in deliberate self-harm.
- Feeling isolated and disconnected from others.

Not so long ago we would ask young people who self-harmed, 'Where did you learn to do this', or 'How did you even know this was something you could try?' but we don't ask so much anymore. They all seem to know about it as a thing people do. It's well and truly out there.

Detecting signs and symptoms can be very difficult, and we often find ourselves saying to parents who are surprised and alarmed they didn't know their child was self-harming, 'You

don't see what you're not looking for.' The most obvious sign is cuts on wrists and arms, and an adolescent with a list of excuses about how that might have happened: 'It was the cat', 'I had to climb over a wire fence.' They may insist on wearing long sleeves when it seems inappropriate, or refuse to wear bathers or shorts when normally you know they would.

The self-harming you discover may appear superficial, but it should never be ignored or dismissed as unimportant. Unfortunately many young people, in their attempts to keep their distress and their maladaptive way of coping a secret, have also learned that cutting less obvious parts of the body makes it easier to hide. Hence, it is not uncommon for people who cut to do so on their thighs, stomach and hips (just so you know that self-harm may be well hidden).

If you discover, or suspect, that your child or adolescent is self-harming, first and foremost don't panic. Be very concerned, but don't panic. Avoid the urge to chastise or accuse. Be curious in a caring way. Don't be afraid to ask, 'Are you OK?', 'These don't look accidental to me. Can you talk about it?' Say something like, 'I am worried about you and I am worried about what these marks might mean,' 'I'd like to know how I can help you to get through this.'

There was a time when experts believed that self-harming was a pre-cursor or warning sign of suicidal ideation. They no longer say this is the case. In fact, a person who self-harms is looking to find ways that help them to cope or feel better, and on one level this is encouraging. Our task, and yours as parents, is to help them gently unpack what is causing them such distress and to help them to find better and less destructive ways to cope with and manage painful emotions.

Remember that deliberate self-harm, although not an overt cry for help, is indeed a sign that your child is attention-needing. This is NOT attention-seeking. Your child needs your attention, your unconditional love and your practical support to help them through. Often this can mean getting professional support from a mental health professional such as a psychologist. If you have any concerns, we are always ready to field your questions. We would always suggest you follow up with a trip to the family GP to assess current mental health, and indeed suicidality, for an unsuccessful suicide attempt, although not the same thing, can look very much like self-harm. The reason for the self-harm must be identified and brought under control.

Discovering that your child has been self-harming can be both confronting and distressing. Look after yourself and seek counselling for yourself if you find you need to talk through the difficult emotions it may evoke.

The following are some useful websites and books that were used in the compilation of this article:

- Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing – <http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au/>
- beyondblue: <https://www.youthbeyondblue.com/understand-what's-going-on/self-harm-and-self-injury>
- Reachout: <https://parents.au.reachout.com/common-concerns/mental-health/self-harm-and-teenagers>
- Australian Government Health Insite –
- http://www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Self_Harm McVey-Noble, Merry E., S. Khemlani-Patel, F. Neziroglu, 2006 'When Your Child Is Cutting- A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Overcome Self-Injury'; New Harbinger Publications, Inc; Oakland.CA
- Reachout – <http://au.reachout.com/find/articles/deliberate-self-harm>
- Sane –
- http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets/suicidal_behaviour_and_self-harm.html Schmidt, Ulrike and Kate Davidson, 2004; Life After Self-Harm- A Guide To The Future; Brunner
- Carr-Gregg, M. 2010, When to really worry, Penguin group, Australia

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