

Top Tips If Your Child Self-Harms



Swanshurst
School

Please find the latest edition of our safeguarding newsletter. For more information on safeguarding please visit our school website www.swanshurst.org/safeguarding/1720.html

Self-harm is any act of intentional self-injury or self-poisoning. Examples include:

- Self-cutting
- Taking an overdose
- Swallowing objects or poisons
- Hitting or bruising
- Self-strangulation with ligatures
- Burning

Self-harm is common in young people: at least 10% report having self-harmed. It is more common in females than males, especially in early adolescence.

"At first, when you see these marks on your child's beautiful skin you're just filled with every emotion that you can possibly think of – fear, anxiety, disbelief, anger and just not knowing what to do."

— Parent finding out about self-harm

1 How to support a child who is self harming - starting a conversation

Some people are concerned about raising the topic of self-harm. However, research shows that asking about self-harm or suicidal thoughts does not put the idea into people's heads.

Start with sharing your concerns about their wellbeing and encouraging them to open up, such as by saying: "I've noticed that [state the changes you have observed in their behaviour e.g. becoming withdrawn or irritable/angry] and I am wondering if maybe things are difficult for you at the moment?"

If you have explicit concerns around self-harm move on to more specific questions about self-harm, such as: "I've also noticed that you've [voice your observation e.g. got some scars/ been covering up] and I know that sometimes this can be a sign that someone has harmed themselves. Can I ask if you've self harmed?"

"I know that people self-harm for many different reasons and that they often experience a range of different emotions. I wonder if you are able to help me understand what leads you to self-harm?"

2 Practical ways to manage self-harm

Practical ways to manage self-harm (based on research) that can be suggested to your child are as follows:

- Building support networks – it is helpful to identify who can support the young person and how they can get in touch with them. This might be friends, family, a school teacher, etc. Knowing how to access a crisis line is also important.
- Distraction activities – Replacing self-harm with other, safer activities can be a positive way of coping with urges to self-harm. It is important to find things that the young person is interested in. Examples include going for a walk or other forms of physical exercise, getting out of the house and going to a public place such as a cinema, reading a book, taking a dog for a walk or caring for a pet, watching TV, listening to music, and engaging in a self-soothing activity such as having a relaxing bath.

3 How to cope with physical stress

There are a number of strategies that can help to manage the extreme tension in the body that young people may feel. Examples include:

- Clenching ice cubes in the hand until they melt,
- Hitting a pillow or soft object,
- Paced breathing (extending the breathing),
- Counting (allows the body to slow down) e.g. count 10 films, 10 animals, 10 flowers etc.,
- Engaging in physical exercise.

4 How to cope with difficult emotions

Young people may be experiencing difficult emotions that they find hard to express. Examples of strategies that may help include: Writing, drawing or talking about feelings; writing a letter expressing feelings (which need not be sent); trying to describe feelings; keeping a diary; talking to others about feelings.

Encourage the young person to make sure that they don't have razors, medication or other means of self-harm available in their room. It can be helpful to encourage the young person to write down a practical safety plan which includes specific things from the lists above, and people to contact if they have the urge to self-harm or have self-harmed.

It may also be helpful to try and encourage the young person to think about some positive things about themselves and their life and develop a 'hope box' where they can store things that make them feel better, such as photos, memories, nice things people have said etc.

*Information taken from Young People who Self-harm
Developed by researchers at the University of Oxford*

Where to go if you feel the problem is getting worse:

Childline 0800 1111 | Papyrus www.papyrus-uk.org | Young Minds www.youngminds.org.uk

Samaritans www.samaritans.org or 116 123 | Harmless www.harmless.org.uk

National Self-harm Network www.nshn.co.uk