

Teen Suicide and Self-Harm

People can develop suicidal thoughts, feelings, impulses, urges, or gestures, for a variety of reasons that are often subjective and quite personal. However a common cause often relates to the individual desperately wanting to end some kind of prolonged emotional pain and suffering. The psychological pain reaches the point of being unbearable, and any escape seems preferable to one having to endure it any longer. In short, to a despairing mind devoid of any hope, suicide appears to be a legitimate option. However, it is important to keep in mind that suicide is a *permanent* solution to what might be a *temporary* problem. Suicide is irreversible. However, the issues that a person is dealing with – despite their tenacity or longstanding nature – might yet be overcome.

Suicide Risk Factors

A completed suicide is very difficult to predict, so all suicidal thoughts or feelings need to be taken seriously. Some especially significant risk factors include the following:

- A plan for suicide (thought has been given to how to end one's life)
- Means to follow-through with plan for suicide
- Sense of overwhelming hopelessness or despair about the future
- Social isolation & lack of a support network
- The above, combined with impulsivity (can be heightened by drug or alcohol use)

If you or someone you love is experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings, it is important to reach out for help. If you are at immediate risk, you should call 911 or get to a hospital where you can be kept safe until the crisis passes or until you get linked up with additional supports.

Self-Harm Behaviors



Self-harm or self-injurious behaviors include a person cutting or otherwise engaging in behaviors that inflict physical pain to themselves. Although I am writing about self-harm behaviors underneath the topic of 'suicide,' most of the research suggests that this kind of behavior should be regarded as separate from suicidal ideation – in other words, evidence of self-harm does not mean that the person is necessarily suicidal. On the contrary, it seems that the most common reason for self-harm is through its use as a crude means of regulating distressing emotion or psychological pain. Many teens claim that they often feel a short-term relief of their emotional anguish when they

engage in self-cutting. However, this is more often than not a short-term crutch, and is of course extremely unhealthy and potentially dangerous. If parents become aware that their teen is cutting, it should be treated as a sign that your child is likely dealing with some heavy feelings that they are not able to understand or manage on their own. In these situations, it can be helpful to ensure that they have a third-party (e.g.

psychologist) involved, to help them work on lessening the behavior (with the goal of ceasing it entirely) while exploring their feelings and encouraging other kinds of coping strategies.

Try to refrain from panicking or 'pathologizing' the behavior. A natural reflex for many parents, and even some clinicians, is to quickly put a stop to the cutting or self-harm behavior by any means necessary. However, this approach may at times be contraindicated. Again, one must understand that the cutting behavior is a crude yet adaptive response to regulating emotion. If you take away the one way that they have of regulating distressing emotion, before setting up additional supports or alternative regulation strategies, your teen may feel even more overwhelmed and helpless. Suicidal thoughts, which may have never crossed their mind, may seem like a viable alternative. In addition, a parent's overreaction may cause the teen to feel even more guilt and shame about themselves and their behavior, which will make it hard for them to be open about the feelings that give rise to the self-harm behavior.

In addition to finding counseling support for their teen, parents may want to take an approach that involves being more curious about how their teen is feeling. Nothing can be worse than ignoring the situation, so do not worry too much about your approach, but in general be careful that you do not jump too quickly toward offering advice or solutions. Instead, just try to listen to what your teen has to say and be sensitive and non-judgmental about their feelings... be curious and do not be afraid of asking more questions, but focus on trying to understand rather than 'fix' the situation. Above all, communicate to them that you are listening and that you care – sometimes the most helpful approach is ensuring your kid that while you might not fully understand what they are going through, they do not have to go through it alone.