



Trauma
Care

Newsletter

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Children Self Harming

WHEN CHILDREN CUT THEMSELVES

It can be hard to understand why people cut themselves on purpose. Cutting is a way some people try to cope with the pain of strong emotions, intense pressure, or upsetting relationship problems.

They may be dealing with feelings that seem too difficult to bear or bad situations they think can't change. Some people cut because they feel desperate for relief from bad feelings. People who cut may not know better ways to get relief from emotional pain or pressure. Some people cut to express strong feelings of rage, sorrow, rejection, desperation, longing, or emptiness.

There are other ways to cope with difficulties, even big problems and terrible emotional pain. The help of a mental health professional might be needed for major life troubles or overwhelming emotions. For other tough situations or strong emotions, it can help put things in perspective to talk problems over with parents, other adults, or friends. Getting plenty of exercise also can help put problems in perspective and help balance emotions.

But people who cut may not have developed ways to cope. Or their coping skills may be overpowered by emotions that are too intense. When emotions don't get expressed in a healthy way, tension can build up — sometimes to a point where it seems almost unbearable. Cutting may be an attempt to relieve that extreme tension. For some, it seems like a way of feeling in control.

The urge to cut might be triggered by strong feelings the person can't express — such as anger, hurt, shame, frustration, or alienation. People who cut sometimes say they feel they don't fit in or that no one understands them. A person might cut because of losing someone close or to escape a sense of emptiness. Cutting might seem like the only way to find relief or express personal pain over relationships or rejection.

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People who cut or self-injure sometimes have other mental health problems that contribute to their emotional tension. Cutting is sometimes (but not always) associated with depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, obsessive thinking, or compulsive behaviors. It can also be a sign of mental health problems that cause people to have trouble controlling their impulses or to take unnecessary risks. Some people who cut themselves have problems with drug or alcohol abuse.



Some people who cut have had a traumatic experience, such as living through abuse, violence, or a disaster. Self-injury may feel like a way of "waking up" from a sense of numbness after a traumatic experience. Or it may be a way of reliving the pain they went through, expressing anger over it, or trying to get control of it.

How Does Cutting Start?

Cutting often begins on an impulse. It's not something the person thinks about ahead of time. Shauna says, "It starts when something's really upsetting and you don't know how to talk about it or what to do. But you can't get your mind off feeling upset, and your body has this knot of emotional pain. Before you know it, you're cutting yourself. And then somehow, you're in another place. Then, the next time you feel awful about something, you try it again — and slowly it becomes a habit."

Natalie, a high-school pupil who started cutting in middle school, explains that it was a way to distract herself from feelings of rejection and helplessness she felt she couldn't bear. "I never looked at it as anything that bad at first — just my way of getting my mind off something I felt really awful about. I guess part of me must have known it was a bad thing to do, though, because I always hid it. Once a friend asked me if I was cutting myself and I even lied and said 'no.' I was embarrassed."

Sometimes self-injury affects a person's body image. Jen says, "I actually liked how the cuts looked. I felt kind of bad when they started to heal — and so I would 'freshen them up' by cutting again. Now I can see how crazy that sounds, but at the time, it seemed perfectly reasonable to me. I was all about those cuts — like they were something about me that only I knew. They were like my own way of controlling things. I don't cut myself anymore, but now I have to deal with the scars."

You can't force someone who self-injures to stop. It doesn't help to get mad at a friend who cuts, reject that person, lecture her, or beg him to stop. Instead, let your friend know that you care, that he or she deserves to be healthy and happy, and that no one needs to bear their troubles alone.

Pressured to Cut?

Girls and guys who self-injure are often dealing with some heavy troubles. Many work hard to overcome difficult problems. So they find it hard to believe that some kids cut just because they think it's a way to seem tough and rebellious.

Tia tried cutting because a couple of the girls at her school were doing it. "It seemed like if I didn't do it, they would think I was afraid or something. So I did it once. But then I thought about how lame it was to do something like that to myself for no good reason. Next time they asked I just said, 'no, thanks — it's not for me.' "

If you have a friend who suggests you try cutting, say what you think. Why get pulled into something you know isn't good for you? There are plenty of other ways to express who you are.

Lindsay had been cutting herself for 3 years because of abuse she suffered as a child. She's 16 now and hasn't cut herself in more than a year. "I feel proud of that," Lindsay says. "So when I hear girls talk about it like it's the thing to do, it really gets to me."

Getting Help

There are better ways to deal with troubles than cutting — healthier, long-lasting ways that don't leave a person with emotional and physical scars. The first step is to get help with the troubles that led to the cutting in the first place. Here are some ideas for doing that:

1. **Tell someone.** People who have stopped cutting often say the first step is the hardest — admitting to or talking about cutting. But they also say that after they open up about it, they often feel a great sense of relief. Choose someone you trust to talk to at first (a parent, school counselor, teacher, coach, doctor, or nurse). If it's too difficult to bring up the topic in person, write a note.
2. **Identify the trouble that's triggering the cutting.** Cutting is a way of reacting to emotional tension or pain. Try to figure out what feelings or situations are causing you to cut. Is it anger? Pressure to be perfect? Relationship trouble? A painful loss or trauma? Mean criticism or mistreatment? Identify the trouble you're having, then tell someone about it. Many people have trouble figuring this part out on their own. This is where a mental health professional can be helpful.
3. **Ask for help.** Tell someone that you want help dealing with your troubles and the cutting. If the person you ask doesn't help you get the assistance you need, ask someone else. Sometimes adults try to downplay the problems teens have or think they're just a phase. If you get the feeling this is happening to you, find another adult (such as a school counselor or nurse) who can make your case for you.

4. **Work on it.** Most people with deep emotional pain or distress need to work with a counselor or mental health professional to sort through strong feelings, heal past hurts, and to learn better ways to cope with life's stresses. One way to find a therapist or counselor is to ask at your doctor's office, at school, or at a mental health clinic in your community.

Your child is self-injuring. What should you do?

Self-injuring is a clue that your child is struggling emotionally, and it won't help the situation if *you* lose control.

Do:

- **Respond when you're calm.** And take a nonjudgmental, concerned stance. Psychologists suggest stating what you've observed – if there are unexplained bruises or if their clothing choice is peculiar for the weather. Then, “ask in a very straightforward manner whether or not they're injuring themselves, and [state] why you're concerned,” she says.
- **Be willing to talk.** Kids often don't tell their parents because they're afraid they'll lose their trust or add stress if mom and dad are dealing with marital or financial issues. Even if you do feel disappointed or stressed, it's important to have an open dialogue. It is suggested saying something like: “I want you to know that I love you, and if these are self-inflicted wounds, I'm here to help you. I'm not here to be angry at you. I'm not here to punish you. I'm here for you to talk to me.”
- **Share your feelings.** It's OK to acknowledge this is something beyond what you as a parent know how to manage. “That's helpful because the child is often feeling overwhelmed by their emotions,” so you can work through your emotions together.

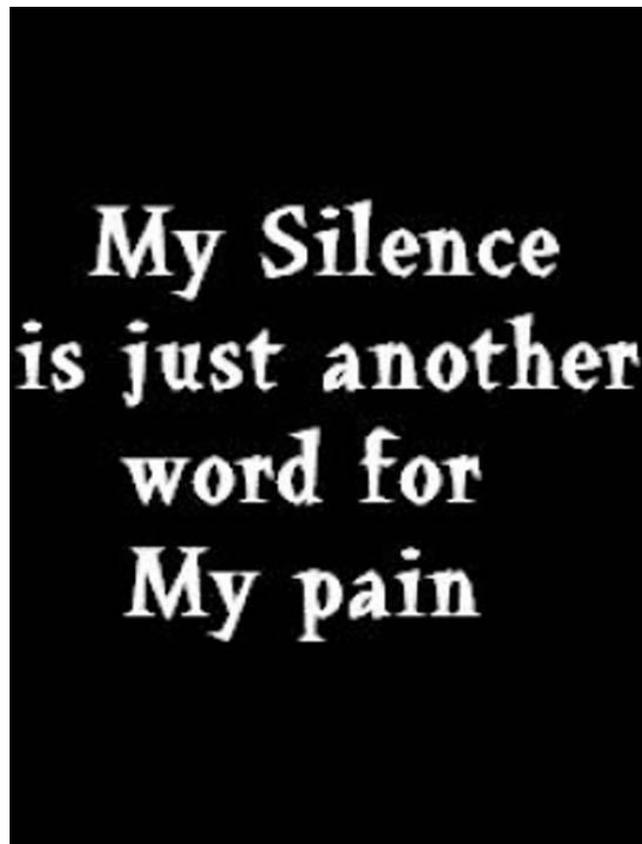
Don't:

- **Respond when you're upset.** You might want to blurt out: “This is a stupid behavior. You should just stop it!” But that only signals to the child she's misbehaving. “This is not a bad behavior, it's an unhealthy behavior,” a Psychologist points out. And if you tell your child to stop before he has a chance to develop a healthier way to cope with emotions, that can be disastrous. “It's like someone who has a broken leg and is using a cane,” “You wouldn't want to take their cane away before they're ready.”
- **Feel guilty.** It's natural to blame yourself for not protecting your son or daughter. But this is not about you. If you're saying, “‘I'm a horrible person,’ that doesn't allow the child to experience their own emotions, and they're going to want to protect their parent,”.
- **Ignore your child.** Sometimes parents think if they pay attention to the behavior, it will make matters worse. “They'll say, ‘They just want attention, so I'm not going to give it to them.’” “But if kids need attention that badly, give it to them.”
- **Focus on the self-injury.** Concentrate on what's driving the behavior, not the behavior itself. “If you only focus on stopping this behavior, you completely miss the boat,”.

Where to Seek Help

Kids don't need to be hospitalized for self-injury unless they're suicidal or the self-injury is so severe it places them in danger, according to Psychologists. "If someone is trying to cope with self-injury, that means they're struggling, and oftentimes these kids could escalate or have suicidal thoughts," she warns. While kids who self-injure have a higher risk of suicide, they emphasize that at the time of self-injury, their motive is to cope – not take their life.

The first step in seeking help is to get an evaluation from a licensed professional such as a pediatrician or child psychiatrist. Some might recommend therapy or medication if the child has anxiety or depression, but treatments vary by case. "The good news is if it's recognized and they begin to get help, they truly can get over this and get better".



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Play Therapy * Counselling * Trauma Counselling

Please note that this information must not be used for diagnostic purposes. Please visit a medical professional for a correct diagnosis.