

Parenting teens/tweens through self-harm and suicidal thoughts

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A presentation in partnership with **Healthy IU**
Difficult Moments Series

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK

OR

Text “HOME” to the Crisis
Text Line at 741741.

What do we mean by self-harm?

Self-injury
Self-poisoning
Other risky behaviors (Wood, 2018)

Also known as Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)

Should I use the term suicide?

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Why would someone self-harm?

- Often it is to decrease or relieve stress (or difficult feelings), to punish themselves, to “feel” a different kind of pain, to express a need for help.
- Some believe it is not related to suicide, but others have found it to be predictive of suicide attempts. Monitoring for suicide is also important.

Risk factors and signs of self-harm

- Depression, anxiety, withdrawal
- Keeping sharp objects around
- Wearing long sleeves or pants - even in hot weather
- Difficult relationships with peers or family
- Spending significant time alone

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What do I do if my teen is self-harming?

- Do NOT FREAK OUT. Manage your own feelings of shame, anger, hurt, sadness, anxiety FIRST.
- Come to them and ask, “Are you okay?” or “I noticed some marks on your arms. Can you talk to me about what’s going on?”
- Work with a therapist or psychologist to develop new ways of managing stress and/or big feelings.
- Some professionals may be less tolerant of this behavior. If you feel like your provider isn’t listening, seek a new provider.
- Sandoval (2014) [5 Keys to Help Teens Break the Self-harm Cycle](#)
- “Believe in your teen’s ability to reduce or overcome self-harm.” (Mass General website)
 - a. Remind them daily that you love them no matter what. Express that you are proud of them. Share your feelings of stress and how you manage sometimes. Check-in frequently and listen without judgment.
 - b. Remember that NSSI is a “maladaptive emotion regulation strategy” (Chapman et al, 2006)

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Risk Factors to Suicide

- Having another mental health disorder - (+) a trigger
- Substance use
- Family history of mental health disorder or suicide
- Access to means, such as firearms or medications
- Exposure to the suicide of a family member or friend
- Other demographics - sexual minority youth, foster/adopted

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Red flags for Suicide

- Talking or writing about suicide - making statements such as "I'm going to kill myself," or "I just want to die." or "I don't want to live anymore."
- Withdrawing from friends or posting about it on social media
- Significant mood swings - including physical acting out potentially (violence, runaway)
- Increasing use of alcohol or drugs
- Feeling trapped, hopeless or helpless about a situation
- Major changes in eating or sleeping
- Engaging in other risky behaviors, self-destructive behaviors

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How do I talk about this?

1. Find a trusted friend or partner to support YOU through this. As parents, we have to make sure we don't feel alone in this. Be sure it is a trusted friend who will NOT intervene if you don't give them permission.
2. Remember that this is a common, yet scary, thing for teens to experience.
3. This is more than a one-time conversation. Be an ASKABLE parent.

How do I talk about this?

1. “So I have noticed that you have been down lately. I’m worried about you. Are you okay?”
2. “I went to this training on suicide in teens last week. I never knew how many kids thought about hurting themselves. Have you ever had thoughts of hurting yourself? Or suicide?”
3. “Do you know any of your friends who have talked about suicide before? What did you think about that? Has that ever been a thought you have had?”
4. “I noticed some marks on your legs. I know that may be scary for you to know that I found out. Could we work together to help you feel better?”
5. “When I was younger, I went through this phase of wondering what it would be like to die. Have you ever had thoughts like that?”
6. “Sometimes, our brains can have some thoughts that feel a little scary. Like suicide. Or hurting yourself. I want you to know that it is really common for people to have thoughts like this. And I just want you to know that you can ALWAYS come to me if you ever have thoughts like this. I want you to come to me if you are ever scared like this.”
7. “I want you to know that I love you and am so proud to be your mom/dad. There is nothing you could say that would make me stop loving you. I noticed there were marks on your arms. Could you share with me what stress feels really big right now?”

Resources

[Teen suicide: What parents need to know - Mayo Clinic](#)

[Teen Suicide | Johns Hopkins Medicine](#)

[Helping a Teen Who Self-Harms \(massgeneral.org\)](#)

[Self-harm in adolescents | Advances in Psychiatric Treatment | Cambridge Core \(Wood, 2018\)](#)