

Cutting & Self-Injury

Most of us know about cutting — using a sharp object like a razorblade, knife, or scissors to make marks, cuts, or scratches on one's own body. But cutting is just one form of self-injury. People who self-injure also might burn, scratch, or hit themselves; bang their head; pull their hair; pinch their skin; pierce their skin with needles or sharp objects; or insert objects under their skin.

People who cut or self-injure often start doing it as young teens. Some continue to do it into adulthood.

Why Do People Hurt Themselves?

It can be hard to understand why people harm themselves on purpose. But it's 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 do it because they feel desperate for relief from bad feelings. People may not know better ways to get relief from emotional pain or pressure. For some, it's an expression of strong feelings like 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 self-harm 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 or another self-injury 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 sometimes say they feel they don't fit in or that no one understands them. A person might self-harm because of losing someone close or to escape a sense of emptiness. It might seem like the only way to find relief or express personal pain over relationships or rejection.

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 self-harm have problems with drug or alcohol abuse.

Cutting and other types of self-harm often begin on an impulse. It's not something the person thinks about ahead of time. 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.

What Can Happen to People Who Self-Injure?

Although it may provide some temporary relief from a terrible feeling, people who self-harm tend to agree that it isn't a good way to get that relief. For one thing, the relief doesn't last. The troubles that triggered it remain — they're just masked over.

People don't usually intend to hurt themselves permanently. And they don't usually mean to keep cutting or doing another type of self-harm once they start. But both can happen. It's possible to misjudge the depth of a cut, for example, making it so deep that it requires stitches (or, in extreme cases, hospitalization). Cuts can become infected if a person uses nonsterile or dirty cutting instruments — razors, scissors, pins, or even the sharp edge of the tab on a can of soda.

Most people who self-injure aren't attempting suicide. It's usually a person's attempt at feeling better, not ending it all. Although some people who self-injure do attempt suicide, it's usually because of the emotional problems and pain that lie behind their desire to self-harm, not the behavior itself.

Self-injury can be habit forming. It can become a **compulsive behavior** — meaning that the more a person does it, the more they feel the need to do it. The brain starts to connect the injury to the false sense of relief from bad feelings, and it craves this relief the next time tension builds. When self-harm becomes a compulsive behavior, it can seem impossible to stop. So it can seem almost like an addiction, where the urge to do it can seem too hard to resist. A behavior that starts as an attempt to feel more in control can end up controlling you.

Getting Help

There are better ways to deal with troubles than cutting or other self-harm — 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 behavior in the first place. Here are some ideas for doing that:

1. **Tell someone.** People who have stopped self-injuring often say the first step is the hardest — admitting to or talking about it. 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 hard to bring up the topic in person, write a note.
2. **Identify the trouble that's triggering it.** Cutting and other types of self-harm are ways to react to emotional tension or pain. Try to figure out what feelings or situations are causing you to do it. 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 really help.
3. **Ask for help.** Tell someone that you want help dealing with your troubles and the self-harm. If the person you ask doesn't help you get the help 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 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.

It can take time to overcome cutting or other kinds of self-injury. But therapists and counselors are trained to help people get through it and find inner strengths that help them heal. Then they can use those strengths to cope with life's problems in a healthy way.

Reviewed by: Leah J. Orchinik, PhD

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How Can I Stop Cutting?

Resisting the Urge to Cut

If you've been cutting and you want to stop, here are some approaches that might help you.

For people who cut, doing something different may be a big change. Making this change can take time because you are learning new ways of dealing with the things that led you to cut. The tips you'll see below can get you started. But a therapist or counselor can do more to help you heal old hurt and use your strengths to cope with life's struggles.

Start by being aware of which situations are likely to trigger your urge to cut. Make a commitment that this time you will not follow the urge, but will do something else instead.

Then make a plan for what you will do instead of cutting when you feel this urge.

Below are some tips you can try when you feel the urge to cut. We've put them into several categories because different people cut for different reasons. So certain techniques will work better for some people than others.

Look through all the tips and try the ones that you think might work for you. You may need to experiment because not all of these ideas will work for everyone. For example, some readers have told us that snapping a rubber band works for them as a substitute for cutting but others say that the rubber band triggers an urge to snap it too hard and they end up hurting themselves.

If one tip isn't right for you, that's OK. Use your creativity to find a better idea. Or talk with your therapist to get other ideas on what could work for you. The idea is to find a substitute for cutting — something that satisfies a need you might feel without being as harmful as cutting.

You may also find that one of these ideas works for you sometimes but not always. That's OK too. What a person needs can vary from time to time and from situation to situation.

The techniques listed on the following pages will help you think about why you might cut — as well as offer ideas on other things to do when you feel like cutting. The more you learn about what's underneath your cutting behavior, the better you will be able to understand and develop healthy ways to heal that pain.

Things to Distract You

Like all urges, the urge to cut will pass if you wait it out. Distracting yourself with something else helps time go by and gets your mind off the urge to cut. The more you wait out the urge without giving in, the more your urges will decrease over time.

Here are some things you can try while waiting for a cutting urge to pass:

- call a friend and talk about something completely different
- take a shower (make sure you don't have razors in the shower)
- go for a walk or run, take a bike ride, dance like crazy, or get some other form of exercise
- play with a pet
- watch TV (change the channel if the show gets upsetting or features cutting)
- drink a glass of water

Things to Soothe and Calm You

Sometimes people cut because they're agitated or angry — even though they may not recognize that feeling. If that's true for you, it can help to do something calming when you feel the need to cut.

Even if you're not sure why you're cutting, it's worth giving these ideas a try:

- play with a pet
- take a shower (make sure you don't have razors in the shower)
- take a bath (make sure you don't have razors near the tub)
- listen to soothing music that will shift your mood
- try a breathing exercise
- try some relaxing yoga exercises

Things to Help You Express the Pain and Deep Emotion

Some people cut because the emotions that they feel seem way too powerful and painful to handle. Often, it may be hard for them to recognize these emotions for what they are — like anger, sadness, or other feelings. Here are some alternatives to cutting that you can try:

- draw or scribble designs on paper using a red pen or paint on white paper — if it helps, make the paint drip
- write out your hurt, anger, or pain using a pen and paper
- draw the pain
- compose songs or poetry to express what you're feeling
- listen to music that talks about how you feel

Things to Help Release Physical Tension and Distress

Sometimes, doing things that express anger or release tension can help a person gradually move away from cutting. Try these ideas:

- go for a walk or run, ride a bike, dance like crazy, or get some other form of exercise
- rip up some paper
- write out your hurt, anger, or pain using a pen and paper
- scribble on paper using a red pen
- squeeze, knead, or smooch a stress ball, handful of clay, or Play-Doh

Things to Help You Feel Supported and Connected

If you cut because you feel alone, misunderstood, unloved, or disconnected, these ideas may help:

- call a friend
- play with a pet
- make a cup of tea, some warm milk, or cocoa
- try some yoga exercises that help you feel grounded, such as triangle pose
- try a breathing exercise like the one in the button above
- curl up on your bed in a soft, cozy blanket

Substitutes for the Cutting Sensation

You'll notice that all the tips in the lists above have nothing to do with the cutting sensation. When you have the idea to self-injure, start by trying the ideas on those lists — such as making art, walking your dog, or going for a run.

If they don't help, move on to the substitute behaviors shown below.

These substitute behaviors won't work for everyone. They also don't help people get in touch with why they are cutting. What they do is provide immediate relief in a way that doesn't involve cutting, and therefore holds less risk of harm.

- rub an ice cube on your skin instead of cutting it
- wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it gently against your skin
- draw on the skin with a soft-tipped red pen in the place you might usually cut

You Can Do It

Cutting can be a difficult pattern to break. **But it is possible.**

If you want help overcoming a self-injury habit and you're having trouble finding anything that works for you, talk with a therapist. Getting professional help to overcome the problem doesn't mean that someone is weak or crazy. Therapists and counselors are trained to help people discover inner strengths that help them heal. These inner strengths can then be used to cope with life's problems in a healthy way.

Reviewed by: D'Arcy Lyness, PhD

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I Started Cutting Again. How Can I Stop?

I used to cut but then I stopped. I was really good for a few months, but lately I've felt like cutting again — and then tonight I actually did. Now what do I do?

– Lyanna*

It's tough to find yourself going back to cutting when you worked so hard to overcome your struggle. Falling back into a bad habit is known as a relapse, and relapses are pretty common when people are trying to make a major change. If you relapse, it might seem like you're back where you started. But change is a learning experience, and a relapse is part of learning a new way of doing things.

You can get back on track.

Start by thinking about what triggered the relapse. Think about the emotions or situations that led you to cut. For example, were you feeling misunderstood, lost, alienated, desperate, or angry?

Then remind yourself why you decided to stop cutting before. How did you do it then? Write down what worked for you. Reach out to someone who cares about you. Think about how to express powerful emotions in ways that don't cause harm. Some people turn to painting, dance, athletics, music, poetry, or keeping a journal as ways to get through the pain. Others find they need more support from a counselor or therapist — everyone is different and different people cut for different reasons.

It can also help to remember that you're not really back where you started — this time you've got previous success on your side. You know how it's done and, more important, you have done it. You can find the inner strength to do it again.

**Names have been changed to protect user privacy.*

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How Can I Help a Friend Who Cuts?

You've heard about cutting — when people use a sharp object to cut their own skin on purpose until it bleeds. Cutting is a form of self-injury.

Lately, you've seen some cuts and scratches on your friend's arm. Could your friend be cutting? If so, what you should you know? And what can you do to help?

Why Do People Self-Injure?

It can be hard to understand why a friend might hurt themselves on purpose. Often, it's complicated. But if your friend is cutting, it's likely they are dealing with problems or painful emotions — and haven't yet found other ways to cope.

Some people say self-injury distracts them from problems they face. Or that it interrupts painful feelings that are hard to handle. Some say it's an outward expression of their inner pain. Some say it gives them a sense of relief or calm when they feel overwhelmed. Some say they do it to 'wake up' and feel something.

But what can start as an attempt to feel better can become a harmful habit that's hard to break.

Do People Self-Injure to Get Attention?

Most people who self-injure aren't doing it to get attention. And most are not trying to die by suicide. But self-injury can cause bleeding or infection that the person didn't intend — or even a life-threatening injury.

Can Self-Injury Be a Sign of a Mental Health Problem?

Some people who self-injure have another mental health issue that needs care. Some have been through trauma or other difficult life events. Some feel isolated, rejected, or alone.

Self-injury isn't a healthy way to cope with problems. But the person doing it isn't to blame. It might take time, but it's never too late to learn healthier ways to cope. And everyone can.

Can a friend really make a difference? You may not be able to solve your friend's problems. That part is up to them. But your support can mean a lot. And it could prompt your friend to get the help they need to feel and do better.

My Friend Might Be Cutting: What Can I Do to Help?

Most of the time, people who self-injure don't talk about it or let others know they're doing it. But sometimes they confide in a friend. Or a friend might find out in another way. If you're not sure if a friend is cutting, here are some things you can try.

Bring up the topic. If you've noticed scratches or healing cuts, it's OK to say something. Tell your friend what you've noticed. You can ask with kindness (and without judgment) if they're hurting themselves on purpose. Ask if they'd like to talk about what they're going through. Ask how you can help.

Offer to talk — and listen. Your friend may not want to talk about it. But you can let them know you care and that you are open to talking anytime. And if your friend wants to talk, you don't need to give answers or advice. Most of the time, you can help best just by listening.

What if you asked about the cuts and scratches and your friend changed the subject? Try again. Let your friend know that you won't judge or lecture them, that you want the best for them, and want to help.

Get help from a trusted adult. Encourage your friend to talk to an adult they trust. Help your friend think of who this could be. You could offer to go with them. If your friend isn't ready for this step, you could talk with an adult. You could talk to your parent, a school counselor, or a teacher or coach your friend is close to.

Let the adult know you're concerned about your friend. Ask them to reach out to your friend, or help your friend meet with a therapist.

If your friend asks you to keep the cutting a secret, you could say that you aren't sure you can. Your friend may be mad at you at first. But talking with an adult can be the first step to helping your friend.

Just be a friend. Try to understand what your friend is going through. But don't let self-injury or problems be the only things you talk about. Make time to do things together that you both enjoy. Find ways to connect in friendship and fun. Having a friend who cares and believes in you can make a big difference. You can be that person for your friend.

Take care of yourself and your own feelings. It's natural to feel worried, sad, or upset about your friend. But it can be draining if you get too caught up in worrying about their problems. And it can be hard on you if your friend is going through a lot — or if they just won't let you help.

Be sure to get the support you need. Even if your friend isn't ready for help, it can help you to confide in an adult you trust. Talk about what's going on and how you feel.

Sometimes, even the truest friend may need to take a break from an intense situation.

Give it time. You can do your best to encourage your friend to get help. But they might not be open to the idea, at least not right away. Be patient. Your friend could need time to think about what you've said. But reaching out in a caring way is the best thing one friend can do for another.

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