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## **TEENAGE SELF- INJURY BEHAVIOR**

Self - injury is intentional, usually non-life threatening, self-inflicted bodily harm of a socially unacceptable nature, performed to reduce and/or communicate intense psychological pain.

Common forms of self-injury include cutting, deep scratching, self-hitting, picking at skin wounds, self-burning and head banging. Though not directly linked to suicidal behavior, self-injury can be a predictor of suicidal ideation.

This behavior is very distressing and confusing for parents to witness. Understand it as a coping mechanism which temporarily reduces intense emotional distress such as anxiety, depression, guilt and anger. While it reduces emotional pain, it causes tissue damage.

Some warning signs include recurrent, unexplained wounds, preoccupation with writings, books, music videos or movies depicting self-injury, and the presence of other maladaptive behaviors such as substance abuse, distorted body image or self-loathing.

Some basic strategies for parents include a very low key and unemotional response. Remain calm and caring. Remain non-judgmental. Don't criticize or condemn the behavior. Don't become over protective as this won't prevent the self-injury, it will actually foster resentment. Understand that self-injury is a coping mechanism for managing emotional distress. Don't blame yourself, and don't deny that your child is self-injuring. Don't assume this behavior will just go away. In other words don't under-react or over-react! Seek professional help in the form of counseling.

Encourage your child to express feelings through whatever mode works for them: verbally, or through writing, journaling, painting, etc. Encourage them to channel the energy through personal strengths. Below are some strategies to develop alternative coping:

### **If cutting to express pain and intense emotions**

- Paint, draw, or scribble on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint
- Express your feelings in a journal
- Compose a poem or song to say what you feel
- Write down any negative feelings and then rip the paper up
- Listen to music that expresses what you're feeling

## **If cutting to calm and self soothe**

- Take a bath or hot shower
- Pet or cuddle with a dog or cat
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Massage your neck, hands, and feet
- Listen to calming music

## **Cutting because of feeling disconnected and numb**

- Call a friend (you don't have to talk about self-harm)
- Take a cold shower
- Hold an ice cube in the crook of your arm or leg
- Chew something with a very strong taste, like chili peppers, peppermint, or a grapefruit peel.
- Go online to a self-help website, chat room, or message board

## **Cutting to release tension or vent anger**

- Exercise vigorously—run, dance, jump rope, or hit a punching bag
- Punch a cushion or mattress or scream into your pillow
- Squeeze a stress ball or squish Play-Doh or clay
- Rip something up (sheets of paper, a magazine)
- Make some noise (play an instrument, bang on pots and pans)

## **Substitutes for the cutting sensation**

- Use a red felt tip pen to mark where you might usually cut
- Rub ice across your skin where you might usually cut
- Put rubber bands on wrists, arms, or legs and snap them instead of cutting or hitting

Remember, self-harm doesn't occur in a vacuum. It's an outward expression of inner pain—pain that often has its roots in early life. Through cognitive behavior therapy unhealthy thinking patterns can be identified, analyzed, challenged, and replaced. The brain can be reprogrammed to think positively. This results in higher self-esteem, greater psychological resiliency, emotional regulation, and the development of healthy coping mechanisms.