

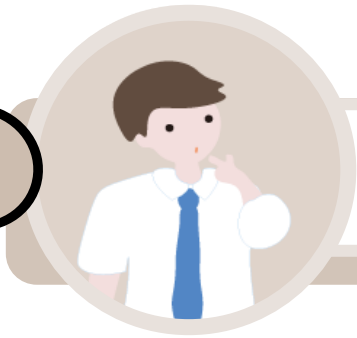
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Self-harm



How to Help Children with Self-harming Behaviours?

Education Bureau 2023



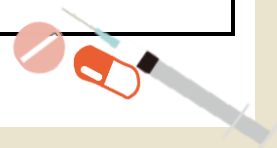
What is “self-harm”?

Self-harm or self-injurious behaviour refers to a deliberate act of harming oneself physically without the intent to end one’s life, usually as a way to express and cope with overwhelming emotional distress. Children or adolescents with self-harming behaviours may present with one or several types of self-harming behaviours.



Common self-harming behaviours include:

Cutting or pricking oneself deliberately	Banging the head or body on hard objects
Self-pinching	Punching things
Self-scratching	Sticking objects such as pins or needles under the skin
Self-biting	Interfering with wound healing or refusing to receive treatment
Burning part of the skin	Ingesting soft drugs or alcohol
Skin ripping or hair pulling	



Self-harm can be performed on any part of the body, most often on wrists, arms, abdomen and thighs. It could be as mild as shallow cuts or as severe as life-threatening injuries that require immediate medical attention. Studies have shown that about 15% or more of adolescents reported having had self-harming behaviours.

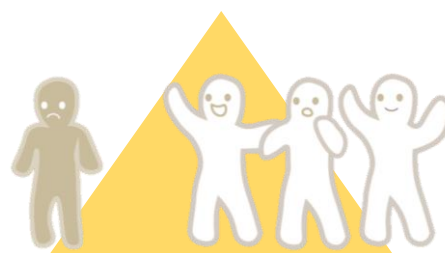
It may not be easy for parents to identify their children's self-harming behaviours at home because adolescents who self-harm tend to conceal such behaviours from others (including family). That said, parents may watch out for the following behavioural signs in their children:



Behavioural Signs



- Mood swings, or changes in sleeping or eating patterns



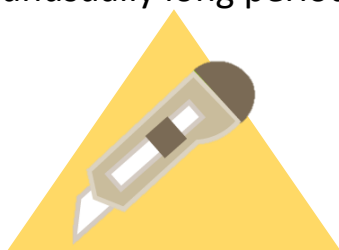
- Socially withdrawn, becoming estranged from friends and family



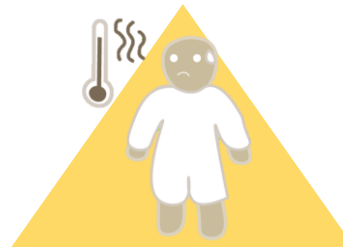
- Secretive behaviours, e.g. shutting themselves in the bathroom or bedroom for an unusually long period of time



- Unexplained cut, bruises, or burn marks on the body



- Possession of sharp objects such as razor blades and cutters, etc.



- Inappropriate dress for the weather, e.g. wearing long-sleeved tops or trousers to cover arms and legs in hot weather deliberately



- Refusing to participate in activities that require change of clothing or wearing of short-sleeved clothes



Why does my child self-harm?

People experience emotional distress at times. As these emotions become too intense to bear, some adolescents cannot find a way out and turn to self-harm to soothe themselves and seek temporary relief. However, when the short-lived sense of relief fades out and the cause of distress has not been dealt with, the feeling of shame or sadness after self-harm will further intensify the distress. When the hurtful feelings come back, they could only turn to self-harm again as a way to cope, falling into a vicious cycle which gradually develops into a maladaptive coping mechanism that provides merely temporary relief.

The causes of self-harm are complex and attributable to various biological, psychological and social factors. Some common underlying reasons as reported by people who harm themselves include:

Coping with unbearable emotions such as guilt, shame and self-hatred

Expressing suppressed emotions such as sadness and anger

Gaining a sense of control over oneself and one's body

Diverting psychological pain to physical one

Seeking care as opposed to attention-seeking

Learning adaptive coping strategies is the key to breaking the cycle of self-harm. Parents should act early to address their children's self-harming behaviours and seek professional help when necessary.





Roles of Parents



While self-harm is not intended to end one's life, repeated attempts to harm oneself are associated with potential suicidal risks.

If I suspect my child is engaging in self-harming behaviours, I should...

- Seek professional advice and assessments for your child as early as possible to enable appropriate treatment and support
- Seek medical help and services to ensure your child's safety if you believe that he/she is in an immediate life-threatening situation (even if your child asks for confidentiality)
- Initiate contact with the class teacher, School Guidance Team or school social worker to enable appropriate support for your child at school

My child is receiving follow-up services from medical professionals, I should...

- Co-operate with healthcare professionals in undertaking the recommended treatment programme to ensure that your child receives the necessary treatment and takes the prescribed medication (if any)
- Take the earliest opportunity to provide the school with the relevant information about your child, including his/her psychiatric report, to enable appropriate support services
- Communicate with the School Guidance Team, school social worker, Student Support Team, class teacher and subject teachers to keep track of your child's learning and adjustment, and, if necessary, discuss appropriate support strategies



The following strategies may be considered when supporting your child:

Using communication skills:



Listen and validate

- Listen to your child's feelings and experiences patiently and non-judgmentally to make him/her feel understood, such as by asking or saying:

"I understand that it may be annoying or uncomfortable to be asked about something so personal."

"It seems to me that you have not been in good shape lately and I'm worried that you might be hurting yourself. Shall we talk?"



- When having a conversation with your child, ask more open-ended questions to encourage the sharing of feelings, such as by asking:

"How do you feel before/after you harm yourself?"

"I can see that you're in great pain. Would you like to tell me what is going on?"

"Is there anything that is really stressing you out right now that I can help you with?"





Refrain from negative responses like:

➤ Over-reacting

For example, looking through your child's belongings and social media accounts for warning signs of self-harm without his/her consent.



Parents are advised to express concern over their children's emotional condition in a direct and respectful way.

➤ Criticising or judging your child's self-harming behaviours

For example, saying "There is no reason to harm yourself!"



This would make your child feel that his/her emotional distress is unaccepted and not being treated seriously.



➤ Focusing solely on your child's self-harming behaviours or lecturing on the matter without addressing their emotional needs

For example, blaming or pressuring your child into talking about the details

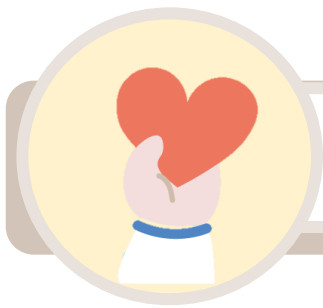
➤ Telling your child to simply stop the self-harming behaviours without identifying alternative coping strategies with him/her



Fostering a supportive home environment:

- Spend quality time with your child with positive interactions, talk about your feelings and show how to express emotions in a healthy way
- Communicate with your child in a positive and effective manner to reduce parent-child conflicts that could lead your child to shut down
- Encourage help-seeking. Reassure your child that you are by his/her side and will seek help with him/her.
- If your child does not feel ready to discuss his/her self-harming behaviours or open up, let your child know that you will lend an ear whenever he/she is ready.





Support Measures and Strategies

In general, schools will provide the following support according to the needs of individual student:



♥ Helping the Student on School Adjustment

- Create a positive school environment and encourage the student to actively seek help from school personnel when emotionally distressed
- Provide individual counselling or group training to enhance the student's problem-solving skills and self-confidence
- Teach the student to replace self-harming behaviours with proper emotion management
- Provide opportunities for the student to practise and rehearse the use of adaptive emotion coping strategies

♥ Helping the Student Get Along and Communicate with Teachers and Peers



- Appreciate and recognise the student's positive behaviours and attributes as well as his/her efforts in various aspects, including his/her positive coping skills and the efforts he/she had made, so as to foster his/her self-worth
- Respond to the student's emotions in a calm and non-judgmental manner as far as possible
- Help the student develop a social support network by getting him/her acquainted with friendly peers

♥ Engaging the Student in Learning Activities



- Having regard to the student's needs and feelings, arrange appropriate classmates to sit nearby or engage him/her in small group learning activities to enhance the student's participation in class
- Provide homework accommodations according to the student's needs to reduce his/her pressure

♥ Strengthening Support and Home-School

Collaboration

- Maintain close collaboration and communication among the school, parents and professionals (such as healthcare professionals, social workers and psychologists, etc.)
- Assist the student and his/her family in seeking appropriate support and services in the community



Useful Websites

Education Bureau



[Homepage of the Education Bureau](#)



["SENSE" Integrated Education and Special Education Information Online](#)



["Mental Health @School" Student Mental Health Information Online](#)



[Operation Guide on the Whole School Approach to Integrated Education](#)



[Teacher's Resource Handbook on Understanding and Supporting Students with Mental Illness](#)

Department of Health



[Child Assessment Service](#)



[Student Health Service](#)

Social Welfare Department



The Hong Kong Council of Social Service



Telephone Numbers for Enquiry

Education Bureau

- General enquiries about special education 3698 3957

Hospital Authority

- Hospital Authority Mental Health Direct (24 hours) 2466 7350

Department of Health

- Child Assessment Service 2246 6659
- Student Health Service 2349 4212

Community Resources and Helplines

