



Tips for Parents - Self-harm

Self-harm is an unhealthy coping mechanism for dealing with overwhelming thoughts, feelings and experiences. If you find out that your child is self-harming it can be hard to process, and to start with we might not know how to react.

Sadly, self-harm in children is on the rise. However, with time and support, children can learn healthier coping strategies to manage difficult emotions. Here are a few tips from experts on supporting children who are self-harming.

Tip 1 – Recognise the signs

Common warning signs of self-harm include:

- Unexplained cuts, bruises, burns or bald patches
- Keeping arms or legs covered up, even in hot weather
- Children blaming themselves for things which aren't their fault
- Bloody tissues in the bin
- Low mood or angry outbursts

Tip 2 – Find a support network

Taking time to learn about self-harm can help you feel more equipped to support your child. Try to find a support network to help manage your own feelings of distress and remember that your child isn't trying to get attention or upset you.

Tip 3 - Remain calm, present and patient

Try to remain calm and present when you talk with your child and don't overwhelm them. It's important to make sure your child is safe, but too much scrutiny can be unhelpful.

Tip 4 – Keep communicating

What your child needs now more than ever is your love and support, so try to listen, empathise and don't be judgemental. With time they will make sense of what is going on and you can work with them to find a better coping strategy.

Tip 5 – Practice empathy and validation

It can be hard for parents to know how to react when their child tells them something upsetting. Your child is likely to feel better if you validate how they are feeling, as opposed to trying to problem solve straight away.

Tip 6 – Work together and make a plan

With open communication and trust, you can work on a plan with your child to keep them safe when they are experiencing a crisis. This might include:

- Things that help me get through the next minute
- Steps I can take to make my situation safer
- Things that help me feel calmer
- People I can turn to for support

It can be helpful to write this list down and to monitor whether these steps are having an impact.

Tip 7 – Get professional advice

Your child's GP will likely refer them to a mental health professional who will complete a risk assessment. If you think your child is at risk while you are waiting for support, you can contact emergency services.

Tip 8 – Take it slowly

For many young people, the best advice is to take it one day at a time. Nothing will improve overnight, but they need to know that you will be there for them.