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Self-harm or self-injury means hurting yourself on purpose. Hurting yourself—or thinking about hurting yourself—is a sign of emotional distress. These uncomfortable emotions may grow more intense if a person continues to use self-harm as a coping mechanism. Self-harm isn't uncommon but people often keep it a secret. Many overcome it with treatment.

## **Why People Self-harm**

Self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior marked by a lack of coping skills. Several illnesses are associated with self-harm.

The urge to hurt oneself may start with overwhelming anger, frustration or pain. When a person is not sure how to deal with emotions, or learned as a child to hide emotions, self-harm may feel like a release. Or if someone doesn't feel many emotions, a person might cause themselves pain in order to feel something "real" to replace emotional numbness.

Once a person injures themselves, they may experience shame and guilt. If the shame leads to intense negative feelings, that person may hurt themselves again. This behavior can become a dangerous cycle.

Self-harm isn't the same as attempting suicide. However, it is a symptom of emotional pain that should be taken seriously. If someone is hurting themselves, they may be at an increased risk of feeling suicidal. It's important to find treatment for the underlying emotions.

## **Treatment and Coping**

The first step in getting help is talking to a trusted adult, friend or medical professional who is familiar with the subject, ideally a psychiatrist. The more information that person can give, the better the treatment plan will be.

- **Medication** can be taken to help with difficult emotions
- **Psychotherapy**

## **What to Do When Someone Self-harms**

Perhaps you have noticed a friend or family member with frequent bruises or bandages. If someone is wearing long sleeves and pants even in hot weather, they may be trying to hide injuries or scarring.

If you're worried a family member or friend might be hurting themselves, ask them how they're doing and be prepared to listen to the answer, even if it makes you uncomfortable. This may be a hard subject to understand. One of the best things is tell them that while you may not fully understand, you'll be there to help. Don't dismiss emotions or try to turn it into a joke. Gently encourage someone to get treatment by stating that self-harm isn't uncommon and doctors and therapists can help.