

Talking to your teenager about self-harm



Address the issue as soon as possible

- 1 **Be constructive in your concern**, you can help your teenager realise the impact of their behaviour on themselves and on others.
- 2 **Offer acceptance and help.** Do this by validating their feelings. This is different from validating their behaviour.
 - be the one to make first eye contact
 - be a respectful listener
 - speak calmly and comfortingly
 - accept what's being said to you rather than disputing it – see it as an initial fact-finding mission
- 3 **Do not pressure your teenager if they don't want to talk.** Remember, the behaviour is occurring because your teenager finds expressing emotions difficult.
- 4 **Do not be judgemental**
- 5 **Set the scene for when you talk.** Choose somewhere confidential where you won't be disturbed and when there is time. Decide on when and how to bring up your worries. Be prepared for your teenager to initially deny they feel bad.
- 6 **In terms of what to say – focus on your observations and concerns.** Statements are better than questions. Eg, 'Danny, I've noticed you've been really stressed recently, seems like things all too difficult at the moment'
- 7 **Be tentative.** Don't start with sensitive subjects, eg. 'I notice how you've hurt yourself by cutting your arms'.
- 8 **Here are some examples of questions you can ask** – direct questions may be frightening.
 - If you don't want to talk to me right now that's ok. I just want you to know that I have noticed your hurt and that I am here for you when you decide you are ready to talk
 - I would like to check with you again about how you are soon. Are you ok with this or would you prefer to come to me? Shall we set up when and how we do this?
 - How does self-harm help you feel better?
 - Have you noticed how you feel before you self-harm?
 - Is there anything stressing you out now that I can be of help with?
 - Is there any way I could help?
 - What's it been like to talk to me about your self-harm? I want you to know I am here to listen.
- 9 **Don't dismiss by simplistic reassurance.** If you are going to say 'it will be alright' give reasons why you think so.
- 10 **Validate rather than dismiss.** They may present their view by dismissing themselves - 'I know it's silly but...' - don't agree with them. Putting oneself down is about low self-esteem, which lies at the core of self-harm.
- 11 **If you disagree with something do not get into a debate about this.** Pros and cons may be more helpful.
- 12 **Don't leave self-harm untreated.** Whilst some young people do grow out of doing it, this is generally because they have found alternative tools to cope. You can help provide them with these earlier.
- 13 **If getting your teenager to accept help is difficult, don't give up** – keep trying.
- 14 **Keep communication going**
- 15 **Listen out for anything that might motivate your teenager and push that one factor**
- 16 **Arrange for things to be easy.** Eg, instead of expecting them to do something on their own accord, break into small steps and do it with them, or if they don't want to go out, arrange for things to happen more at home.

Things to avoid

DO NOT

- shout
- lecture
- punish
- humiliate
- give ultimatums
- threaten
- intrude (eg. take away any privacy such as locks on bedroom door)

DO NOT SAY THINGS LIKE

- “I know how you feel”
- “You are doing this to punish me”
- “I feel like a bad parent”
- “You are mad to do something like this”
- “This is totally unacceptable behaviour”
- “No one in our family has been crazy”
- “You’ve let us all down”
- “Well, it’s your body and your responsibility”
- “You will get suspended from school and never get into university”
- “You are so attention seeking”
- “I thought you’d be better than this”

Take your teenager seriously. Self-harm is serious – STEM IT AT THE START

Tips on enhancing family resilience

- Show you care
- Accept your teenager’s feelings, even if you can’t understand them!
- Model healthy ways of managing stress
- Show healthy ways of regulating emotion
- Show constructive ways of expressing negative emotions such as anger or fear
- Keep lines of communication open
- Be non-judgemental
- Make time for the family to be together
- Respect your teenager’s need for privacy
- Respect your teenagers need for individuality
- Find out if your teenager is on any sites that promote self-harm and have clear rules
- Show you are open to discussion
- Watch out for rejecting statements
- Avoid over-checking
- Learn basic first aid
- Do not take self-harm instruments away – the control has to come for your teenager.

However, you can suggest distractions and alternative strategies

Change needs practice – be patient.