

# Understanding Teen Self-Harm

A Guide for Parents & Caregivers

*Self-harm is a sign that a teen is struggling — not that they are “bad” or broken. Your calm, compassionate presence is the most powerful thing you can offer.*

## WHY TEENS SELF-HARM

*Self-harm is rarely attention-seeking — it is most often a way to cope with emotions that feel overwhelming.*

- **Emotional regulation:** Relief from numbness, anxiety, anger, or sadness that feels uncontrollable.
- **Expressing inner pain:** When words fail, physical pain can feel like the only way to show how much they hurt.
- **Sense of control:** During chaotic or traumatic times, it may feel like the one thing they can control.
- **Self-punishment:** Intense shame, guilt, or low self-worth can drive teens to punish themselves physically.
- **Feeling something:** Emotional numbing from trauma can make physical sensation feel grounding or real.

## HOW TO TALK TO YOUR TEEN

- 1 **Choose the right moment.** A calm, private setting — a walk or drive eases the pressure of face-to-face conversation.
- 2 **Lead with love, not anger.** “I noticed some marks and I’m worried. I love you and want to understand what you’re going through.”
- 3 **Listen more than you speak.** Reflect back: “It sounds like you’ve been really overwhelmed.” Feeling heard reduces shame.
- 4 **Ask directly about safety.** Asking “Are you thinking about ending your life?” does NOT increase risk — it opens an honest door.
- 5 **Involve a professional.** “I’d like us to find someone to talk to — not as punishment, but to help you feel better.”

## HELPFUL VS. HARMFUL

### ✓ DO

- Stay calm and regulated yourself
- Validate their emotions first
- Thank them for being honest
- Follow through on getting help
- Check in without interrogating
- Remind them they are loved

### ✗ AVOID

- React with anger, panic, or disgust
- Dismiss it as “attention-seeking”
- Promise to keep it secret
- Shame or punish the behavior
- Search their room without talking
- Assume one conversation is enough

## KEEPING YOUR TEEN SAFE

### Secure Sharp Objects

Lock away or relocate razors, box cutters, craft knives, and scissors to less accessible locations.

### Secure Medications

Store all prescriptions and OTC medications in a locked cabinet. Dispose of unused medications promptly.

### Communicate, Don’t Just Restrict

Tell your teen why you’re making changes. Framing it as care — not punishment — reduces conflict.

### Pair with Professional Support

Safety measures buy time but are not a cure. Always combine them with ongoing mental health treatment.

## ■ CRISIS RESOURCES — If your teen is in immediate danger, call 911.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline  
**Call or Text 988**

Crisis Text Line  
**Text HOME to 741741**

Teen Line (peer support)  
**1-800-852-8336**