

Self-Harm

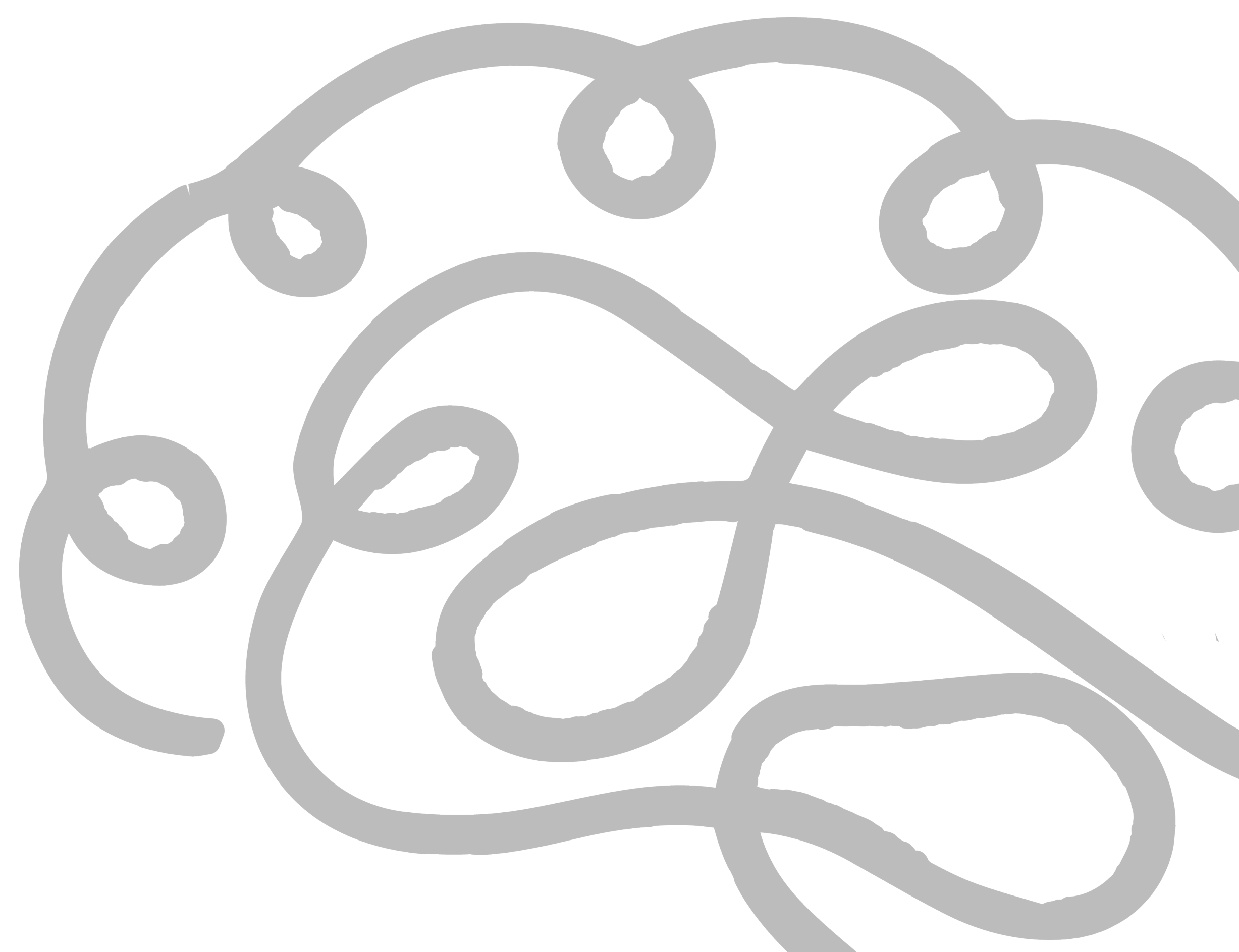
Smart Things to Know

- Self-harm, also known as self-injury, is the act of intentionally inflicting physical harm on oneself as a way to cope with emotional pain, overwhelming feelings, or distress. Medical experts often refer to cutting and other forms of self-harm as non-suicidal self-injury, or NSSI.
- Self-harm behaviors include cutting, burning, hitting, scratching, biting, or other forms of self-inflicted injury. These actions can leave visible marks or scars on a person's body.
- The average age to start self-harming is 15 years old. 25% of young people who self-harm only have one incident. The majority stop self-harming after 5 years.*
- Self-harm is often an indication of depression, anxiety, trauma, a feeling of helplessness or other emotional distress. It can be a way for young people to release emotional pain or regain a temporary sense of relief or control when they feel overwhelmed by their emotions.
- Self-harm isn't just about seeking attention. It's often a sign of deeper emotional pain that a young person might not know how to express in a healthier way.
- Kids of all genders engage in self-harm, including boys and non-binary or transgender youth.
- Engaging in self-harm doesn't mean that a person is having suicidal thoughts or wants to die. However, newer studies show that when self-harm goes on for long periods, young people face higher risks for suicidal thinking and actions.* For this reason, parents should take immediate steps if they believe their child is self-harming.

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Smart Things to Do

- **Say more sooner.** Use a social media post, news article (or this resource!) as a conversation starter to have proactive, general conversations with your preteen about self-harm. Take a non-judgemental position, ask open-ended questions and listen more than you talk.
- **Encourage healthy coping strategies** such as writing about feelings in a journal, practicing mindfulness, talking to friends and family members and movement.
- **Keep an eye out** for signs like unexplained cuts, bruises, or burns, wearing long sleeves even in hot weather, or finding sharp objects hidden in their stuff. If you notice these, don't panic. Instead, gear up for a caring chat.
- **Recognize the influence of social media.** While Instagram may not be a direct cause of self-harm, excessive scrolling can lead to sleep deprivation, exaggerated feelings of envy, isolation, fear of missing out and poor body image. All of these issues feed the powerful emotions that prompt some kids to self-harm. A family screen time strategy put in place long before the preteen years is key.



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If you're concerned that your child may be self-harming:

- **Time a conversation wisely.** Don't bring it up when they're busy, doing something they enjoy, or when siblings are around. Let them know ahead of time that you want to talk to them about something important and ask when a good time would be.
- **Don't punish them.** Self-harm is not done for attention-getting or an act of rebellion. It's a sign of serious emotional distress.
- **Don't ask why.** Your child may not have the answer, which can cause them to feel shame or embarrassment. Instead, ask them what you can do to help them feel better.
- **Be prepared for a strong reaction.** Because people who self-harm often try to hide it, your child might be upset or refuse to talk. Calmly tell them that you're worried they might be self-harming and want to support them to find healthier coping strategies.
- **Stay calm and listen.** If your child opens up about self-harm, take a deep breath, listen with empathy and resist judgment. They need your support, not criticism or hysteria.
- **Validate their feelings.** Help them feel loved, nurtured, acknowledged and heard.
- **Create a safe space** where your child can share their feelings without fear of judgment or punishment.

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- **Remove items that can be used to self-harm.** Rather than grabbing a knife from the kitchen drawer, going through the effort of finding something to use for self-harm may give your child time to think about what they're doing and change their mind. Lock sharp items away, take them with you or hide them, but don't leave them out for easy access.
- **Talk about first aid.** Self-harming doesn't stop overnight, so provide your child with antibiotic cream, bandages and anything else they may need to keep their wounds clean. Describe the signs of infection and what to do if they suspect one (tell you).
- **Seek Professional Help.** Let your child know that you're going to make an appointment with their family doctor. Encourage them to be there for this conversation, but even if they won't go with you, make the appointment. Reach out to a therapist or counselor who can provide expert guidance and support...even if your child doesn't want you to.
- **Be patient.** Healing is a process, so take one day at a time. Be prepared for setbacks. Celebrate small victories along the way.
- **Take Care of Yourself.** Supporting your child can be emotionally exhausting. Make time for activities you enjoy. Connect with friends. Lean on your partner. Talk to your doctor about sleep aids if you're not getting much. Reach out to support groups and seek counseling if needed.

**Remember that having a child who self-harms
DOES NOT make you a bad parent.**

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Smart Things to Say

- “There’s something really important I need to talk to you about (don’t worry, you’re not in trouble!). When would be a good time?”
- “I came across this article on teens and self-harm and, as much as it scares me, I need to talk to you about it. Can you give me 5-7 minutes?”
- “Have you ever heard of someone your age self-harming?”
- "Hey, I've noticed that you've been going through a tough time lately, and I'm worried about you. Can we talk about what's been going on?"
- “I remember feeling overwhelmed by my emotions from time to time when I was your age...”
- "I'm grateful you felt comfortable sharing this with me. I'm not upset or angry."
- “Is there anything I can do to help you feel better?”
- “I'm here for you no matter what.”
- “I want you to know that you don't have to go through this alone.”
- “I care about your well-being, and I want to help you through this.”
- “What do you need from me at this moment?”
- “Let's work together to get to the root cause of your distress.”
- “You might not know any other way to express or process intense emotions to feel better without hurting yourself. However, self-harm provides only temporary relief, so I want to help you find healthy ways to cope with those intense emotions over the long-term that keep you safe and healthy.
- “I just want to better understand what you're going through. Can you tell me more about how you feel before and after cutting?”
- “Let’s set up a plan for what to do if you are having urges to self-harm again.”
- “Sometimes, especially when we’re really struggling, it helps to talk to a professional who can offer guidance as you sort through your emotions. Would you like me to help you find a therapist to talk to?”
- “Things will get better.”
- “I’m proud of you for being open to getting help.”
- “I’m proud of you for having the courage to tell me what’s going on for you.”
- “Thank you for trusting me with this information.”
- “I love you and I’m here for you every step of the way.”

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Resources:

**The Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery Infographic:*
<http://www.selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/siinfo-2.pdf>

Self-harm Support:

<https://cmha.bc.ca/documents/self-harm-2/>

<https://www.wellbeing.gov.bc.ca/mental-health/self-harm>

<https://www.crisistextline.org/topics/self-harm/#what-is-self-harm-1>

<https://kidshelpphone.ca>

<https://youthspace.ca>