

December 2018 - KAHF Post – Non-suicidal self- injury in Adolescents

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Non-suicidal self-injury or self- harm is common during early –mid adolescence. It refers to [deliberate, self-inflicted](#) destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent and can include cutting, biting, scratching, hand banging etc. It is typically more prevalent in females and affects teens of varied ethnic, racial, and socio-economic background. Self-harm often serves an important [psychological function](#). Teens may engage in self-harm to manage painful, negative emotions; elicit emotion when feeling numb, relieve intense emotions; alleviate a feeling of numbness or emptiness; punish themselves, distract from suicidal thoughts, elicit attention or communicate psychological pain. Teens who engage in self-harm are at higher risk for [suicidal attempt and suicide](#).

Recognizing self-harm

Adolescents who engage in self-harm often have unexplained or clustered scars or marks, fresh cuts, bruises, burns, or other signs of bodily damage. They may constantly use wristbands and dress inappropriately for the season such as long sleeves shirts or pants during summer. They may also be unwilling to participate in events that require less body coverage. Adolescents may exhibit social withdrawal, poor academic performance, have difficulty controlling anger, mood irritability. Self-harm may be associated with [mental health conditions](#) such as anxiety, depression, post -traumatic stress disorder, eating disorder, substance use or borderline personality disorder etc.

Responding to adolescents who self harm

It is very important to show [respect and willingness](#) to listen in a non-judgmental fashion. When communicating with an adolescent, be direct and honest about your observations and concerns. Respect their privacy and reassure them. Avoid telling them to “just stop” or make them promise they will not do it anymore. Instead, discuss coping strategies and provide them with resources for behavioral intervention and support. Screen for risk factors and create a safety plan. If adolescents are suicidal or have significant injury because of self-harm, it is important to break confidentiality and inform parents or guardians for further psychological and or medical interventions.

Resources

- 1) [Non-suicidal Self-Injury in Adolescence](#)
- 2) [The functions of deliberate self-injury: a review of the evidence.](#)
- 3) <https://www.crisistextline.org/selfharm/>
- 4) [Coping with self-harm-A Guide for Parents and Caregiver](#)