



March is Self-Harm Awareness Month

There are countless ways that people deal with pain, trauma, mental illness, and the challenges of life. One way that people, especially adolescents and young adults, try to regain control and find release is through physical self-harm. However, this habit can become cyclical and difficult to manage. But there IS hope, whether it's you, a family member, or friend who is struggling. **March is Self-Harm Awareness Month.**

The definition of **Self-harm is physically hurting yourself on purpose**. The **most common form of self-harm is cutting**, but it **can also include** many other methods such as head-banging/hitting, burning, scratching, or pulling hair. It **also includes doing things that cause internal damage**, such as ingesting poisonous or toxic substances, or consuming too much alcohol or drugs. It's important to know that **this isn't usually an attempt at suicide** but rather a way to deal with emotional distress.

Self-harm may provide a sense of release or control for a moment, but it typically leads to negative feelings and shame, causing a **destructive cycle**. It's a **pattern** that can be difficult to get out of if someone becomes dependent on self-harm.

For those who have not experienced it, self-harm can seem perplexing. To understand this behavior, it might help to understand the biochemical mechanisms that underpin self-injury—namely, the body's release of endorphins in response to pain.

Endorphins are natural painkillers produced by the brain, which can create a sense of emotional release or numbing. Because physical and emotional pain activates the same parts of the brain, those endorphins may bring emotional relief immediately following a self-harming behavior. For this reason, self-harm typically occurs in response to severe stress or psychological pain. Some research suggests that those who self-harm may have a higher pain tolerance, which may explain why the physical discomfort it causes may not be enough to deter the behavior.

Some signs of self-harm are external and more obvious, such as:

- Scars, often in patterns
- Fresh cuts, scratches, burns, or other wounds
- Burns created from excessive rubbing
- Missing patches of hair

Other signs can be less obvious or physical but still point to self-harm:

- Wearing long sleeves or pants in hot weather or other articles of clothing to hide their injuries.
- Keeping sharp objects around for no apparent reason
- Reporting accidental injuries often
- Having difficulty with relationships
- Acting behaviorally and emotionally unstable or impulsive
- Saying they feel hopeless or worthless

If you believe someone you know is hurting themselves, you may feel uncomfortable, afraid, or helpless. Remember that the best thing you can do for them is to offer love and compassion without trying to force them to change. Only they can make the choice to seek help. Ask them how they are doing, listen without trying to solve the problem, and even offer to help them find treatment.



If you relate to any behaviors or physical symptoms listed above, **help is available. Self-harm isn't uncommon and is treatable.**