

Amanda Robins Psychotherapy

HELPING YOUR TEEN HEAL

Tips for parents of young people who are self-harming



A M A N D A R O B I N S

SELF-HARM: A GUIDE TO HELPING YOUR TEEN HEAL



1. Your first reaction may be one of shock and disbelief and your first instinct may be to blame yourself. “Where have I gone wrong?”

2. Try not to react with anger or judgement. It may be best to wait until you and your teen have both calmed down before discussing the issue more fully. When we are aroused our brains do not work as they do when we are calm – the “thinking part” of the brain shuts down when the amygdala is triggered.

3. Invite them to have a cup of tea or coffee so that you can both sit down at the table and discuss things calmly – it is harder to get really angry or upset over a cup of tea! You may want to invite them to a quiet café nearby where you can talk privately, without being interrupted.



4. All behaviour has a meaning - and a reason – young people self-harm because they find the behaviour intrinsically rewarding in some way. That is, they get something out of it.

5. Given the “rewards” that self-harming offers to young people who do it, getting involved in a power struggle over your teen’s self-harm will be counter-productive. They will just find some way around any bans and will become more secretive around their self-harming behaviours. Hiding their tools will not work in the long term. Remember that the person will probably be very sensitive to judgement – and to your bewilderment or anger.



6. Although it is very natural for a parent to be shocked by this behaviour you will need to get beyond this and discuss the self-harming from a position of curiosity – for example: “tell me about what is going on for you” – taking any judgement or upset out of your question if you can.

7. Whilst self-harm is not a good sign, it is not the same thing as suicidality and some people eventually let go of the behaviour without any lasting problems or impact



8. Self-harm is often a response to strong emotions. It may be your teen's way of dealing with them. Teenager's brains are still developing and they may not have the experience or the skills to manage emotions as an adult might.

9. You CAN help by offering alternatives to self-harm – distraction techniques, meditation and mindfulness are all very useful aids in helping to minimise self-harming behaviour. See the Distraction Techniques Tip Sheet at the end of this book for ideas.

10. When things have calmed down a little, you should try to explore what is going on for your teen at the moment that has caused them distress. When discussing difficult topics like self-harming, it can be useful to suggest taking a break if it seems like one or both of you need one.

11. Examples of possible triggers include friendship or relationship breakdown, bullying, and other problems at school, problems at work or home, a stressful event like moving cities or schools, a recent death in the family, preparing for exams or transition to university or high school.

12. The aim is to help them find alternatives to self-harming.

13. Emotion regulation is a skill that CAN be taught.



PART 2

Distraction Techniques for Self-Harm

Questions to ask yourself

You can ask yourself the following questions which may help you to identify the negative feelings or situations that lead to self-injury:

- What was going on in my life when I first began to injure myself?
- How do I feel just before I want to injure myself?
 - What are my habits and routines? Am I always in the same place or with a particular person when I get the urge to injure myself?
 - Do I always feel the same emotion when I get the urge to injure myself?
- How can I better deal with the situations that trigger me? You may want to keep a diary in which you write down your feelings at different times so that you can better answer these questions.

Alternatives to Self-harming



I want to stop self-injuring, but I still have urges.
What do I do instead?

The good news is that many young people report that just delaying an urge to self-injure by several minutes can be enough to make the urge fade away.

One way to increase the chances of a distraction or substitution working for you is to match what you do to how you are feeling in the moment when your urge hits you.

It may be helpful to keep a list on hand so that when you get the urge to self-injure you can go down the list and find something that feels right to do at that moment.

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P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

F E E L I N G A N G R Y

- Slash an empty plastic soda bottle or a piece of heavy cardboard or an old shirt or sock.
- Squeeze ice.
- Do something that will give you a sharp sensation, like eating lemon.
- Make a soft cloth doll to represent the things you are angry at. Cut and tear it instead of yourself.
- Flatten aluminium cans for recycling, seeing how fast you can go.
- Hit a punching bag.
- Pick up a stick and hit a tree.
- Use a pillow to hit a wall, pillow fight style.
- Rip up an old newspaper or phone book.
- On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do. Cut and tear the picture.
- Make clay models and cut or smash them.
- Throw ice into the bathtub or against a brick wall hard enough to shatter it.
- Dance.
- Clean.
- Exercise.
- Bang pots and pans.
- Stomp around in heavy shoes.
- Play handball or tennis.

F E E L I N G S A D O R D E P R E S S E D

Do something slow and soothing. • Take a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles. • Curl up under a comforter with hot cocoa and a good book. • Baby yourself somehow. • Give yourself a present. • Hug a loved one or cuddle a stuffed animal. • Play with a pet. • Make a list of things that make you happy. • Do something nice for someone else. • Light sweet-smelling incense. • Listen to soothing music. • Smooth nice body lotion into the parts of yourself you want to hurt. • Call a friend and just talk about things that you like. • Make a tray of special treats. • Watch TV or read. • Visit a friend



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P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

CRAVING SENSATION & FEELING EMPTY OR UNREAL

- Squeeze ice.
- List the many uses for a random object. (For example, what are all the things you can do with a twist-tie?)
- Interact with other people.
- Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream).
- Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root. Rub liniment under your nose. Slap a tabletop hard. Take a cold bath. Stomp your feet on the ground. Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath.



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P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

F E E L I N G U N F O C U S S E D

Do a task that is exacting and requires focus and concentration. •
Eat a raisin mindfully. Notice how it looks and feels. Try to describe the texture. How does a raisin smell? Chew slowly, noticing how the texture and even the taste of the raisin change as you chew it. •
Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can. • Choose a random object, like a twist-tie, and try to list 30 different uses for it. • Pick a subject and research it on the web.



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P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

FEELING GUILTY OR LIKE A BAD PERSON

Feeling guilty or like a bad person: • List as many good things about yourself as you can. • Read something good that someone has written about you. • Talk to someone that cares about you. • Do something nice for someone else. • Remember when you've done something good. • Think about why you feel guilty and how you might be able to change it.



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P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

OTHER DISTRACTION AND SUBSTITUTION TECHNIQUES

Reach Out to Others • Phone a friend. • Go out and be around people. Express Yourself • Write down your feelings in a diary. • Cry - crying is a healthy and normal way to express your sadness or frustration. • Draw or color. Keep Busy • Play a game. • Listen to music. • Read. • Take a shower. • Open a dictionary and learn new words. • Do homework. • Cook. • Dig in the garden. • Clean. • Watch a feel-good movie. Do Something Mindful • Countdown slowly from 10 to 0. • Breathe slowly, in through the nose and out through the mouth. • Focus on objects around you and thinking about how they look, sound, smell, taste and feel. • Do yoga • Meditate • Learn some breathing exercises to aid relaxation.

- Concentrate on something that makes you happy: good friends, good times, laughter, etc.
- Release Your Frustrations
- Break old dishes.
- Rip apart an old cassette tape, smash the casing.
- Throw ice cubes at a brick wall.
- Throw eggs in the shower.
- Rip apart an old phone book.
- Smash fruit with a bat or hammer.
- Throw darts.
- Punch pillows.
- Scream into a pillow.
- Slam doors.
- Yell or sing at the top of your lungs.
- Exercise.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amanda Robins MSW, PhD is a psychotherapist and is in private practice in Fitzroy, Melbourne. She specialises in self-harm, eating disorders and Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD).

Amanda's attachment-based, psychodynamic approach to psychotherapy is effective for addressing anxiety and self-harm issues in adolescents and young people. Her approach to self-harm focuses on helping young people develop greater self-awareness and to manage strong feelings, improving their ability to cope in times of stress.

[Click here to learn more about my approach to self-harm treatment and my practice Melbourne.](#)

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