ND THRIVES
Rural & Tribal Youth Suicide Prevention

When your teen is hurting

A guide for parents and caregivers about self-harm

Learning that your teen has been hurting themselves can leave you scared, confused, or wondering what you missed. You may not know what to say. You do not need perfect words to take the first step. Your teen needs to know you care, and you deserve support, too.

Start with a calm moment

If there is no immediate danger, find a quiet place to talk. Take a breath and lead with care. You might say:

- "I love you, and I'm glad you told me. We'll get help together."
- "You don't have to explain everything right now. I want to understand."

If your first reaction came out as anger or shock, you can begin again: "I was scared. I'm sorry for how I reacted. I want to listen."

Listen before trying to fix it

- Self-harm means hurting yourself on purpose. For some teens, it is a way of trying to handle feelings that seem too hard to manage. Ask, "What has been feeling hard lately?" Let them talk at their own pace. Avoid blame, punishment, or asking them to promise they will stop.
- If they are not ready to talk with you, ask, "Is there someone else you would feel comfortable talking to?" Keep checking in gently.

Take the next step together

- Self-harm does not always mean a teen wants to die, but thoughts of suicide can happen too. Ask clearly: "Are you thinking about suicide?" Even if they say no, contact a doctor or mental health counselor promptly. Get medical care for injuries when needed.
- Ask the counselor to help you and your teen make a simple plan: what to do when feelings build up, who to contact, and where to get urgent help. Secure medicines, firearms, and items your teen might use to hurt themselves.

Keep showing up

- Small moments count—a meal together, a ride, or sitting nearby without pressing for answers. Ask which family members, cultural connections, or trusted people help them feel supported. Work with the school counselor so your teen has someone to turn to during the school day.
- You do not have to become your teen's therapist or handle this alone. Talk with a counselor or trusted support person about your own worries, while respecting your teen's privacy.

When help cannot wait

For a serious injury, an overdose, or immediate danger, call 911 or go to an emergency department. Stay with your teen while getting help. For emotional distress or suicidal crisis, call or text 988. Parents and caregivers can reach out, too.

School support contact _____

Phone _____

More information American Academy of Pediatrics Cornell parent guide