

Children who exhibit self-injurious behavior (SIB) perform deliberate and repetitive acts of injuring their own body as a way to cope with overwhelming negative feelings, such as sadness, anxiety or stress, or as a way to experience some sense of feeling. SIB can also provide a way for the youth to express some internal rage, to re-enact a past trauma, or to offer a brief sense of control. Some forms of self-injurious behavior are cutting, carving, scratching, burning, branding, biting, bruising, hitting, and picking/pulling skin and hair. A child that self-injures does so typically with secrecy and shame, so they will seek to hide the injuries with long clothing and try to explain the injuries with probable causes. Research indicates that girls are more likely to self-injure than boys, and that most begin SIB between the ages of 12 to 15.

## How it affects my child

Children who participate in SIB

- Often feel alienated, isolated and powerless to stop
- Are more likely to engage in other risky behaviors, such as substance or alcohol abuse
- Often have an underlying mental health concern, such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder
- May continue to self-injure into adulthood; but with therapy, support and training in healthy coping strategies, and possibly medication, SIB can be overcome
- May be responding to a history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse

## What can we do about it?

- Talk openly and non-judgmentally about the behavior with your child to help reduce the shame and secrecy that surrounds self-injury.
- Be aware that SIB is a method for your child to temporarily lessen overwhelming emotional issues. Addressing the emotional issues that "set off" the action will help more than focusing on stopping the action of self-injury alone.
- Be cautious not to punish a child that engages in self-injurious behavior. Punishing may increase the child's troubled emotions.
- Work with your child to identify those "triggers" or events that are most likely to cause a desire to self-injure. • Be aware that most teenagers engaging in self-injurious behavior are not attempting suicide. It is critical to recognize, however, that some injuries are life-threatening.
- Work with a mental health professional experienced in self-injurious behavior. They can work with you and your child about uncovering the meaning behind the self-injury and identifying strategies you and the child can use to help prevent further injury.
- Learn about and talk with your child about healthy ways to communicate, self-soothe, and cope such as writing, drawing, exercising, and relaxation techniques.

## Resource Links

### Children's Mental Health Matters!

Facts for Families — First Steps in Seeking Help  
[www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org](http://www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org)

### American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

This site contains resources for families to promote an understanding of mental illnesses.  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

#### *Facts for Families No. 73*

[https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families\\_and\\_Youth/Facts\\_for\\_Families/FFF-Guide/Self-Injury-In-Adolescents-073.aspx](https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Self-Injury-In-Adolescents-073.aspx)

### Mental Health America

<https://www.mhanational.org/self-injury-and-youth>

### S.A.F.E Alternatives (Self-Abuse Finally Ends)

<http://www.selfinjury.com>  
Info Line 800-DONTCUT (366-8288)

### Resource for Teens

**To Write Love on Her Arms**  
[www.twloha.com](http://www.twloha.com)



Coordinated by



The Children's Mental Health Matters! Campaign is a collaboration of the Mental Health Association of Maryland (MHAMD) and the Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) with support from the Maryland Department of Health - Behavioral Health Administration. The Campaign goal, with School and Community Champions across the state, is to raise public awareness of the importance of children's mental health. For more information, please visit [www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org](http://www.ChildrensMentalHealthMatters.org)