

# Fact<sup>1</sup> Sheet for Parents: Understanding Self-Injury in Teens (and How It May Differ in ADHD Teens)

## Understanding Self-Injury in Teens

### What is Self-Injury?

Self-injury, or self-harm, involves deliberately hurting oneself to cope with overwhelming emotions or gain a sense of control. It can include behaviors like cutting, scratching, burning, or hitting, and is not typically intended as a suicide attempt. For many teens, self-injury provides temporary relief from intense emotional pain or stress.

### Why Do Teens Engage in Self-Injury?

Teens turn to self-injury for various reasons, often in response to:

- Emotional Overload:** Intense feelings like sadness, anger, anxiety, or frustration may feel unbearable, and self-injury becomes a way to “release” that emotional pressure.
- Life Stressors and Social Pressures:** Breakups, friendship issues, academic pressures, or difficult family dynamics can trigger self-injury, especially if a teen lacks other ways to cope.
- Peer Influence and Curiosity:** Some teens may learn about self-injury through friends or social media and experiment with it out of curiosity.
- Endorphin Release:** The physical sensation of self-injury sometimes causes the body to release endorphins, leading to a temporary feeling of relief or numbness that reinforces the behavior.

### Signs That a Teen Might Be Engaging in Self-Injury

Since self-injury is often a private behavior, it can be not easy to notice. Some signs include:

- Unexplained cuts, bruises, or burns, particularly on the arms, legs, or torso
- Wearing long sleeves or layers, even in warm weather, to hide injuries
- Withdrawal from friends and family or acting secretly
- Emotional swings or signs of stress, sadness, or anxiety
- Avoiding activities they once enjoyed or changes in behavior and energy levels

### Is Self-Injury the Same as a Suicide Attempt?

While self-injury is typically a coping mechanism and not intended to be fatal, it’s still a sign of significant emotional distress. In cases where injuries are severe or there’s a history of suicidal thoughts, a teen may need immediate professional support.

## How Self-Injury May Differ for Teens with ADHD

For teens with ADHD, self-injury can arise for many of the same reasons but is often influenced by the unique traits of ADHD, including impulsivity, emotional sensitivity, and struggles with self-regulation. Here's how ADHD traits can shape self-injury:

### 1. Emotional Intensity and Dysregulation in ADHD

- Heightened Emotional Sensitivity:** Teens with ADHD often feel emotions more intensely, especially around stress, rejection, or frustration. This heightened emotional experience, sometimes called Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD), can lead to overwhelming feelings that may make self-injury seem like a quick way to cope.
- Difficulty Calming Down:** Once activated, emotions can feel more consuming for teens with ADHD, and they may have difficulty calming down. For some, self-injury can feel like a way to release this emotional buildup, especially if other self-soothing methods aren't yet developed.

### 2. Impulsivity and Self-Injury Risk

- Quick Impulsive Reactions:** Teens with ADHD are often impulsive, which means they may self-injure quickly when emotions are high, without stopping to consider the consequences. This impulsivity can make self-injury more likely to occur "in the moment" when they feel distressed.
- Seeking Immediate Relief or Stimulation:** ADHD often involves seeking immediate responses to manage stress, and self-injury may feel like a quick way to change emotional or physical states, even if it's only temporary.

### 3. Struggles with Emotional Awareness and Expression

- Difficulty Naming Emotions:** Many teens with ADHD find it challenging to identify and describe their emotions, a skill sometimes called "alexithymia." When they can't fully identify what's wrong, they might use self-injury to physically express or "release" their inner distress.
- Limited Toolbox of Coping Skills:** Without healthy coping strategies in place, teens with ADHD may have fewer outlets for handling emotional distress. Therapy and ADHD-focused mindfulness practices can help build these skills, but self-injury may develop as a stand-in if they don't yet have the tools to handle intense feelings in other ways.

### 4. Sensitivity to Rejection and Low Self-Esteem

- Challenges with Self-Worth and Self-Compassion:** Many teens with ADHD face academic or social difficulties that impact self-esteem. Feelings of failure or frustration can build up, sometimes leading them to self-injury out of a lack of self-compassion or self-kindness.
- Rejection Sensitivity:** ADHD teens often have high sensitivity to rejection, which can intensify feelings of emotional pain. Self-injury may feel like a way to relieve these

intense emotions in the face of social or academic rejection.

## 5. Higher Rates of Co-Occurring Mental Health Challenges

- Anxiety and Depression:** Many people with ADHD also experience anxiety and depression, which can increase the risk of self-injury. Emotional regulation difficulties inherent to ADHD often compound these feelings, making it even harder to avoid self-injury.
- Sleep Disruptions and Burnout:** Sleep issues are common in ADHD, and poor sleep can lower emotional resilience. Fatigue can increase impulsivity and make it harder to manage intense feelings, increasing the likelihood of self-injury.

## Supporting Teens with ADHD Who Engage in Self-Injury

For parents, understanding the unique challenges ADHD teens face can be essential for providing effective support.

### Building ADHD-Specific Coping Skills

- Encourage ADHD-focused therapy, where teens can learn emotional regulation skills tailored to their needs, such as grounding techniques, mindfulness practices, and self-soothing exercises.
- Provide sensory outlets that may meet their emotional and physical needs, like physical activities, art, or music, as these can help reduce self-injury by offering alternative ways to manage stress.

### Creating a Supportive Environment

- Teens with ADHD benefit from an environment where their differences are accepted, and they feel safe to express themselves. Having an ADHD-affirming household, where they are celebrated for their unique strengths, can help build self-esteem and lower the emotional distress that leads to self-injury.

### Encouraging Self-Compassion and Emotional Expression

- Teach your teen self-compassion by modeling it yourself. For example, use gentle language to reframe mistakes as learning opportunities and encourage them to view challenges with kindness.
- Support them in expressing and identifying emotions by asking open-ended questions about their feelings and validating what they share, even if you don't fully understand.

### When to Seek Professional Help

If self-injury becomes more frequent, severe, or is causing significant distress, reaching out to a mental health professional who understands ADHD and self-injury is essential. Indicators that more help may be needed include:

- Injuries that require medical care, such as stitches
- Co-occurring mental health conditions like severe anxiety or depression
- A pattern of impulsive behaviors that includes self-injury or other risky activities

Professional support can provide teens with structured strategies to manage emotional distress, understand the roots of their self-injury, and develop alternative coping methods that work for their ADHD needs.

Understanding the ways ADHD can shape self-injury risk is essential in providing a compassionate and effective approach for parents and caregivers. By supporting teens in building ADHD-specific coping tools, reinforcing self-compassion, and seeking professional

support; when needed, parents can guide their teens toward safer, more adaptive ways to manage their emotions.

# Parent Worksheet: Supporting a Teen Engaging in Self-Injury

This worksheet will guide you in creating a positive, affirming approach to supporting your teen experiencing emotional distress.

## 1. Reflecting on Your Feelings and Responses

- What emotions come up for you when you think about your teen's self-injury? (List 2–3 feelings you're experiencing, such as worry, fear, confusion, or sadness.)

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- *Reflection:*
- How can you manage your emotions to approach the conversation calmly and compassionately?

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## 2. Learning and Understanding

- Describe in your own words what you understand about self-injury and why it may happen.

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- *Understanding self-injury can help you respond with compassion.*

### 3. Planning Your Conversation with Your Teen

- What are three things you want to convey to your teen when you talk about their self-injury?

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- Examples: *"I'm here to listen," "You're not alone," "I want to understand and support you."*

### 4. Setting Up a Safe Environment

- How can you create a comfortable, private space for this discussion?

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- Tips: *Choose a quiet place where they feel safe. Avoid using a tone that could feel judgmental or confrontational.*

### 5. Developing Open-Ended Questions to Start the Conversation

- Write 2–3 open-ended questions you might ask your teen.

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- Examples:

- "How are you feeling lately?"*
- "Would you like to share what's been on your mind?"*
- "Are there times you feel more overwhelmed or stressed?"*

### 6. Identifying Signs to Seek Additional Help

- Reflect on the signs listed in the fact sheet. Write down any indicators that may suggest reaching out for professional support.

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- *If your teen is resistant to discussing self-injury or it continues to intensify, consider talking with a therapist for advice.*

### 7. Self-Care for Parents

Supporting a teen in distress can be emotionally taxing. List three self-care practices you can turn to for support.

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- *Examples: Practicing deep breathing, connecting with a support group, taking time for personal reflection.*

### 8. Identifying Healthy Alternatives Together

Think of activities that could serve as an emotional outlet for your teen. Write down a few to explore together.

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- *Examples: Journaling, drawing, sports, spending time in nature, mindfulness exercises, hobbies that break from stress.*