

# Self-Harming in Children & Teens

## What is self-harm?

Self-harming is when someone damages or injures their body on purpose. Someone may want to intentionally hurt themselves physically because they think it will help relieve their emotional pain. While there can be a link between self-harming and suicidal thoughts, someone who is self-harming is not necessarily wanting to end their life, but it is still very serious, and they are experiencing a lot of pain and distress.

## Why do people self-harm?

Sometimes, the reason someone self-harms is unknown. Other times, it may be linked to a traumatic experience from a past or current situation. Also, the reason(s) someone self-harms may change over time. If someone is self-harming, it may also mean that they have one or more other underlying mental health needs that they are struggling with.

Some of the reasons a youth may self-harm include:

- Punishing themselves
- Responding to unpleasant thoughts that they want to forget
- Physically communicating emotional distress, anxiety or depression
- Trying to cope with emotional pain
- Wanting to feel in control
- A cry for help

## Types of Self-Harming

The most common types of self-harming that we typically see and treat in the children and teens we serve include:

- Cutting or deeply scratching their skin
- Piercing their skin with sharp objects
- Burning their skin
- Hitting or punching themselves
- Banging their head or other body parts against hard or sharp surfaces
- Pulling out hair
- Picking at existing wounds
- Swallowing objects that will harm their internal organs or cause life-threatening damage

A person's arms, legs, and front torso are the most common areas where people tend to self-harm, but they may also use other parts of their body.

## Signs & Symptoms

It can be difficult for a child to understand and explain what they are feeling so it's very important for caregivers to pay close attention to behaviors. Below is a list of behaviors that may indicate a child or teen is self-harming.

- Several or frequent cuts, scratches, bruises, bite marks or other wounds
- Several scars, often in patterns or on the same area of the body
- Excessive rubbing of an area to make it burn
- Keeping sharp objects nearby, such as in their bedroom, bathroom or personal belongings
- Constantly wearing long sleeves or pants, especially in hot weather
- Frequent accidental injuries
- Difficulties in interpersonal relationships, connecting with family and friends
- Behavioral and emotional challenges
- Acting impulsively or being unpredictable
- Making statements of feeling hopeless or worthless
- Increased isolation

## Our Locations

### KANSAS CITY

4300 Brenner Dr.  
Kansas City, KS 66104

### WICHITA

1507 W. 21<sup>st</sup> St. N.  
Wichita, KS 67203

### HAYS

205 E 7<sup>th</sup> St.  
Hays, KS 67601

## What You Can Do to Help

If you know a child who is self-harming, here are some ways you can help them:

- **Seek professional help immediately.** It's important to have a physician or licensed mental health professional examine the child for an accurate assessment and diagnosis of their physical and mental health.
- **If the youth expresses thoughts of suicide, call 911 immediately.** Take these statements very seriously and get them professional help as soon as possible.
- **Stay calm in front of them.** They are often observing how the adults around them react and if you panic, it may cause them more emotional distress. It's important that you do not yell, make threats or shame them. Create a safe space.
- **Teach them other ways to self-cope when they feel those feelings arise,** such as making art, going on a run, doing yoga, meditating, or other activities that they enjoy and can relieve intense feelings through.
- **Encourage frequent, open and honest conversations.** Ask them how they're feeling and allow them the time and space to open up as they're ready. Just letting them know you are there for them to have a judgment-free conversation will build trust.



## Contact KVC Hospitals for Support

KVC Hospitals is a network of nonprofit children's psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment centers serving youth ages 6 to 18. Each year, we give thousands of youth a safe place to heal, build resilience, and overcome struggles with behavioral and mental health challenges. Our compassionate team of psychiatric, medical and behavioral health professionals provides a nurturing and therapeutic experience along with a treatment plan tailored to meet each child's individual needs. The goal of our treatment programs is for each child to safely return home with the resources and supports in place to live a healthy and happy life in their community.

If you're concerned that a child in your care is self-harming or has other mental health needs, **call KVC Hospitals at 913-890-7468.**

We're available 24/7 to answer your questions.

### Here's a list of additional resources you can contact for help:

- Call the child's primary care physician or your local community mental health center
- Text HOME to 741741 for 24/7 support from the Crisis Text Line
- Call the National Alliance on Mental Illness helpline at 800-950-6264, which is staffed by volunteers who have mental health conditions
- Call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255