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Why Would Anybody Self-harm?



▲ ALINA BALTAZAR

YOU MAY BE WONDERING, “WHAT IS GOING ON WITH TEENAGERS THESE DAYS! WHY WOULD ANYBODY PURPOSEFULLY CUT THEMSELVES?” I KNOW THAT WAS MY FIRST RESPONSE WHEN I LEARNED ABOUT SELF-HARM AMONG TEENAGERS IN THE EARLY PART OF MY CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK CAREER.

It is only getting more prevalent over the last few decades, according to a 2022 study. At first you may think it is a suicide attempt or a way to get attention. Research has examined some possible causes and ways it can be prevented and treated.

Those who self-harm (this includes cutting, burning, and intentionally scratching oneself) are usually doing it to cope with emotional distress. As you know, when you get cut your body reacts in a certain way. People have found that response actually helps to decrease emotional pain or feeling numb. Self-harm is not a mental illness itself, but it is an indication something is wrong emotionally. Half of those who self-harm will attempt suicide at some point if they don't get the help they need, according to a 2021 article in *World Psychiatry*.

There are things research has found that can decrease the chance of self-harm in our youth. Open supportive communication between parents and teens is the most protective thing parents can do to decrease several problematic teenage behaviors. This can be difficult for Christian parents who are concerned that talking about certain things will put ideas into their kids' heads. Trust me, those ideas are already there, even when you think you have protected them from worldly influences.

Be ready for those tough questions. Listen to their perspective. Avoid lecturing! Kids are dealing with things their parents never had to deal with when they were young. Look for opportunities when kids are more open to talk, which gets harder the older they get, but still can happen. Enjoyable family meals and

family worship are a great place for good conversations to happen, but dialogue can happen anytime, like in the car when you are running errands. Do whatever you need to do to keep those lines of communication open.

Other tips for parents and caring adults include:

- Be a good example of healthy coping, though admit you struggle sometimes too.
- Be patient and hopeful. Self-harm can become a habit that is hard to break. It needs to be replaced with a better way to cope. Give them hope they can eventually overcome.
- Remind them God is with them every day of their lives, and that they are not alone. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20, NIV)

Even Christians struggle with difficult emotions and negative ways to deal with them. God knows the pain we go through in this sinful world. We can pour out our emotions to God. King David was a great example of this in the book of Psalms. It is important to note that kids who won't or can't stop self-harm need professional help like they would for any other more serious physical health condition. There are ways self-harm can be treated.

If you want to learn more, especially if you work with families, here is a link to a resource from General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Family Ministries <https://family.adventist.org/resources/resource-book/2023rb/> ■

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