

# Is your teen self-harming?

*By Renee Norris, MBACP 08 July 2018*

Being a teen is hard; there is no manual for getting through teenage issues. So, when they struggle, is it any wonder they turn to unhelpful coping mechanisms or even self-destructive behaviour?

Self-harming behaviour can be distressing for the teen and those around them because they may not understand why they cut themselves, and it may also leave parents with a sense of failure, blame or shame. This in itself can make communication harder.

It may be assumed that if a teen is cutting themselves they must be suicidal. This is normally not the case.

NSPCC have this to say about self-harm:

“Self-harm can take lots of physical forms, including cutting, burning, bruising, scratching, hair-pulling, poisoning and overdosing. There are many reasons why children and young people try to hurt themselves, and once they start, it can become a compulsion. That's why it's so important to spot it as soon as possible and do everything you can to help. Self-harm isn't usually a suicide attempt or a cry for attention. Instead, it's often a way for young people to release overwhelming emotions. It's a way of coping. So, whatever the reason, it should be taken seriously.”

I often hear young people say that friends and family think they are seeking attention. It is important to know that this isn't usually the case.

Being a teen today brings many challenges. Some of these challenges won't go away as they come with the territory. Some of the issues counsellors can spot within their work with teens who self-harm are:

- Loneliness.
- Fear they will lose their closest friendships.
- Lack of confidence.
- Inability to express anger.
- Lack of control over their lives.

These reasons can be very similar for adults; however teens are still learning to navigate their emotional landscape.

**Q.** Does this mean I have failed as a parent?

**A.** No, what it does mean is that your child is struggling with something which may or may not have anything to do with you. They are growing up, and experiencing real life issues that they just don't know how to manage more effectively.

**Q.** What can I do to help my teen who is self-harming?

**A.** Listen without judgement or wanting to change them. Address any wounds, and don't forget first-aid is important. Don't tell them to stop - if they could, they would. Seek professional help, with the safeguarding lead at your teen's school or a private counsellor. If you are distressed by your teen's behaviour then get help to manage your own emotions so that you can help your teen. I will repeat the first point of listening without judgement. Don't use phrases like, "I don't understand why you cut yourself" or "Is this my fault?"

If you are concerned that your teen may be cutting themselves or know someone who is impacted by self-harming, please get in touch with a counsellor. We are all here to help.