

HELPING CHILDREN AND YOUTH WHO SELF-HARM



As a parent or guardian, it's normal to feel overwhelmed, scared and confused if you see signs of self-harm in your youth. This fact sheet will help you understand what self-harm is, and how it develops. You'll learn strategies to help your youth right now and in the long-term.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone tries to hurt themselves on purpose but doesn't intend to commit suicide. Self-harm is mostly your youth's way of coping with stress, and is not the same as trying to end their life. But these behaviours can continue over time if the underlying stresses are not properly handled.

Some of the most common signs that your youth might be self-harming include:

- cuts or scratches on the surfaces of the skin
- burn marks on the skin, like from a cigarette
- taking too much medication, but not enough to kill themselves ("minor overdosing")
- hitting their head, like against a wall

Why do people self-harm?

Many mental health professionals believe that most youth use self-harm behaviours as a way to cope with stress. Some of the goals behind self-harm include:

- to get relief from painful or distressing feelings
- to deal with feeling numb
- to communicate pain or distress to others

All of these underlying reasons are actually quite healthy, but self-harm is an unhealthy way to achieve these goals.

Who is at risk?

Self-injury behaviours usually start between 13 and 15 years of age and happen most often in youth and young adults. One study of Canadian youth found that almost two out of every 10 youth, aged 14-21 had hurt themselves on purpose at one time or another. Self-harm behaviours are twice as common in girls and young women, compared to males.

Self harm develops when a vulnerable person experiences a stressful event or situation and doesn't know how to cope.



Vulnerable person

Mariam has always been a bit shy and reserved. She's also had some family members who have self-harmed.



Stressful event or situation

Mariam recently came out to her friends and family and now gets made fun of by kids at school.



Coping

She doesn't know how to manage the situation and tells herself "I hate myself. I wish I never said anything."

As youth harm themselves more often, their thoughts alone can become a trigger for self-harm. For example, Mariam might engage in self-harm just by thinking "I wish I never said anything," without any stressful event at all.

How is self-harm treated?

Self-harm behaviours are usually treated through 'talk therapy'. Effective treatments for self-harm will help your youth:

- identify what triggers cause them to self-harm
- improve problem solving so they can manage stressful situations more effectively
- learn to control their emotions and find healthier ways to handle them
- change unhealthy thoughts and replace them with more positive ones
- boost their people skills to help resolve conflicts and get support from others

How can I help right now?

Effective treatment can take a while, but there are many things you can do to help your youth right now:

- Show you care. Let your youth know that you care. Tell them you love them and are concerned for them.
- Acknowledge their feelings. Remember that they may be very stressed or upset. Ask them how you can help or support them.
- Learn basic first aid. Take care of any minor cuts or self-injuries. If your youth needs medical care like stitches, offer to take them to the nearest hospital or doctor's office.
- Build trust. Showing disgust or making your youth feel guilty about self-harming will make them feel worse, and could cause them to lose trust. Tell them you love them no matter what, and you are

willing to listen without getting angry or upset.

- Suggest self-soothing techniques and other distractions like listening to soothing music, reading, scented candles or working out.
- Understand that treatment takes time. You can't ask your youth to "just stop" self-harming. For now, it's their way of coping and, without it, your youth might act on impulses to end their life.

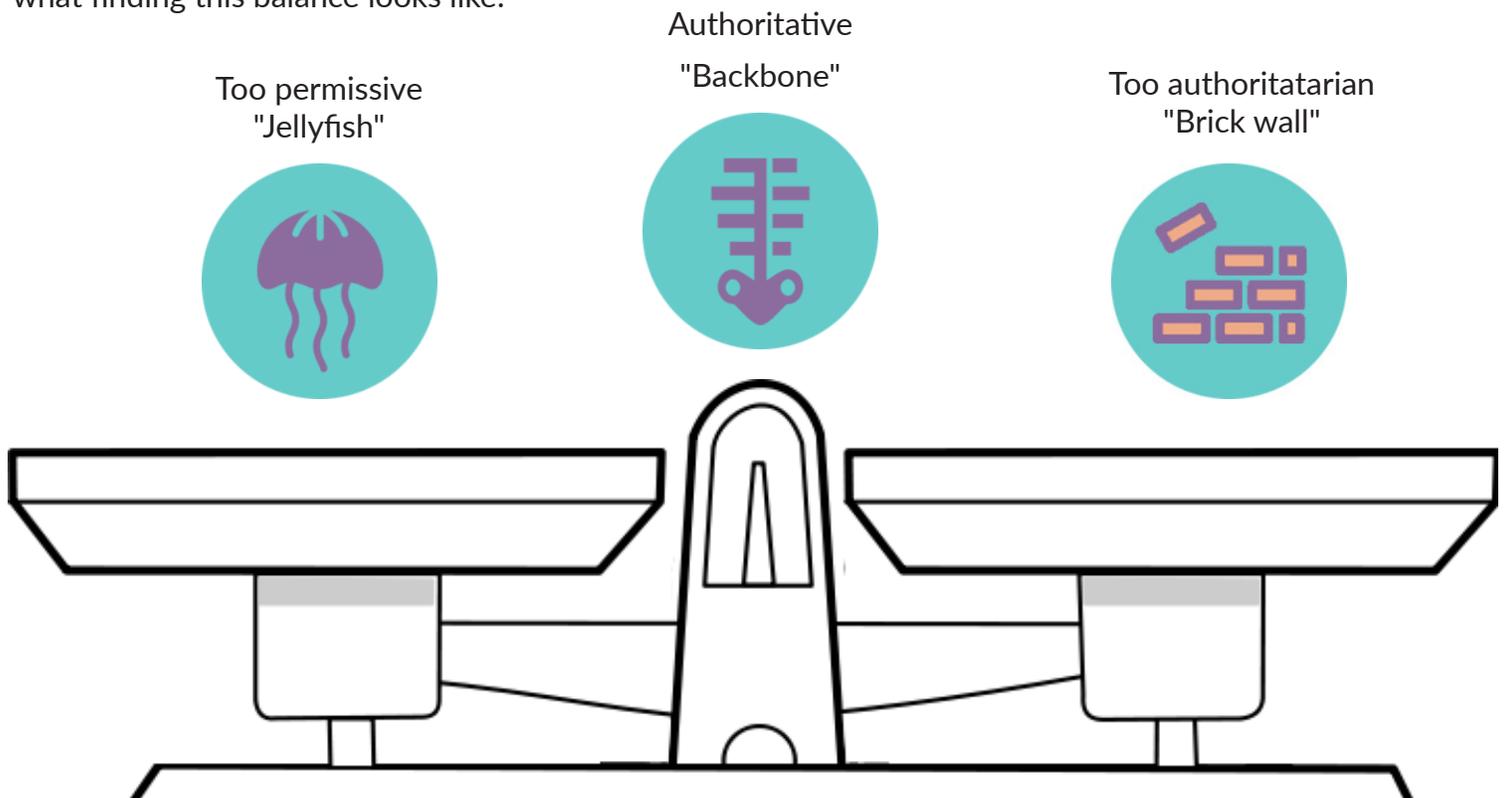
In case of emergencies, contact a telephone crisis line, or call 911

How can I help over the long-term?

1. Ask your youth about stresses. **"What makes you feel like hurting yourself?"**
2. Find goals or solutions. **"What do you wish we could change about your stress or trigger?"**
3. Come up with possible solutions to try. **"What could we try together? What could you try?"**
4. Try out a solution. **"What would you like to try first?"**
5. Evaluate whether or not the solution helped. **"How do you think that worked out?"**
6. If it didn't work, try something different. **"What other things could we try instead?"**
7. If it helped, keep on doing it. **"It looks like that worked-what shall we keep on doing, then?"**

Positive parenting and guardianship

Children and youth do best when parents and guardians try to find an "authoritative" balance. Parent educator Barbara Coloroso uses the analogy of a jellyfish, a brick wall, and a backbone to illustrate what finding this balance looks like:





Too permissive "Jellyfish"

- doesn't give enough rules
- doesn't display concern
- doesn't take problem behavior seriously
- isn't protective enough
- gives too much independence



Authoritative "Backbone"

- gives guidance and reasonable rules
- gives freedom as children and youth show responsibility
- spends time talking, doing activities and building a healthy relationship



Too authoritative "Brick wall"

- gives too many rules
- is too concerned
- takes behavior problems too seriously
- is over protective

No matter what stresses led to your youth's self-harm, positive parenting or guardianship can help.

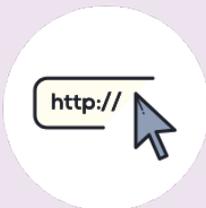
What should I do if my youth threatens self-harm?

Some youth who self-harm may try to use it to get more privileges, or to escape consequences. For example, a youth may say, "If I can't stay out late with my friends this weekend, I'll feel depressed and cut myself."

If you are feeling manipulated or pressured into doing something unreasonable, then ask yourself what the rules and limits would be if your child didn't self-harm. If you feel your rules are fair, then don't give in. By giving in, you end up supporting the unhealthy part of your youth.

As the responsible parent or guardian, you might say something like: "I'm sorry if you don't agree, but it's fair to expect you to be back by curfew time. It would be unhealthy for you if we didn't have reasonable rules."

At the same time, if your child is truly feeling overwhelmed from having too many responsibilities, it makes sense to go easy for a bit. You might say, "I know that you're a bit overwhelmed these days. So how about this: instead of having to take the dog out every day and do the dishes, you only have to do one of those things for the time being. You can choose which one you want to keep doing for now."



Need more information?

[Cheo.on.ca](http://cheo.on.ca) is the best place to find information on CHEO's programs and services and learn about a variety of health topics for children and youth. Visit our online resource section to access CHEO-recommended websites, books, apps, videos and more!