My child is self-harming, what can I do?

If you have recently discovered that your child is self-harming, you may feel at a loss as to what to do next. Here we offer an insight into some of the reasons children hurt themselves on purpose, plus how to spot the signs and where to turn for help.

Why didn’t I notice before?

The reasons behind self harm - which can include cutting, burning, hitting and poisoning - are complex, and it is very bewildering as a parent to discover that your child is hurting him - or herself - on purpose. You may feel that you’ve failed your child by not making them happy enough, or that you’ve fallen short as a parent by missing the signs that something was going wrong enough in their life to make them self harm. You may feel frightened that your child will go on to attempt suicide – and it’s true that children who self harm are at around 100 times greater risk than others.

All these feelings are natural, but it can be hard to get inside the mind of a pre-teen or teenager at a time when they may feel that no one really understands them, or that they are mature enough to deal with any difficulties in their lives themselves.

If you suspect your child may have been self harming for a while, try not to blame yourself for not noticing. As with other harmful activities, young people can become adept at hiding the signs: they will often harm themselves in areas of their bodies that aren't publicly visible, or may dress to conceal cuts, scars and burns. They usually self harm in secret, perhaps during the night or at other times when they know they won't be discovered.

Why does my child self harm?

Self harm is usually triggered by an upset of some sort: a family crisis; an argument with a close friend; a break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend; bullying or other trouble at school. Youngsters who are prone to depression, or who have an eating disorder or other mental health problem are at greater risk, as are drug-takers and drinkers. In these cases, judgment is already impaired, and the pressure of any extra problems can build until the only relief comes from experiencing the pain of self harm.
What can I do?

- If you suspect your child may be at risk of self harming, be on the look-out for uncharacteristically withdrawn, irritable or secretive behaviour.
- Be on the alert if your child dresses in long sleeves and long trousers all the time, even in warm weather, and can't be persuaded to wear anything more revealing.
- Don't forget your child is still your child and will continue to be into adulthood, and don't assume they're at an age where they should be able to solve all their own problems. Your job as a parent and adviser is lifelong.
- If you discover your child has injured himself or herself, dress any wounds and seek medical help if necessary, but try not to fly off the handle.
- Now that you're aware of the problem, try to be sympathetic rather than despairing or hyper-critical. Talk to your child and be a great listener. This means finding time for one-to-one conversations; listening without interrupting or judging; 'reflecting', which means repeating back the key things your child has told you; and empathising.
- Seek family therapy if you are going through any traumatic changes or circumstances at home.
- If you feel too upset, angry or overwhelmed to help your child effectively, ask your GP for advice.