



Self-harm & Trauma in Adolescents



Approximately 70% of adults in the United States report experiencing at least one traumatic episode at some point in their lives. Trauma remains a risk factor for nearly all mental health issues. If untreated, complex trauma can seriously impact a child’s overall well-being.

What Do We Know About the Relationship Between Self-Harm and Trauma in Teens?

Unfortunately, self-harm and trauma often go hand-in-hand in adolescents. When teens endure trauma, they may struggle to understand or cope with their emotions. They might self-harm to suppress painful memories, release emotional pain, or punish themselves. Any history of trauma is a significant risk factor for self-harm in teens. One study found that 71.3%

of adolescents who struggled with self-harm also reported childhood abuse. The most common forms of self-harm in teens include cutting, burning, head banging, and wound picking.

Trauma is also a risk factor for mental health issues like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance abuse in adolescents. These issues can reinforce one another, worsening self-harm behaviors and mental health problems over time if left untreated.

Self-harm serves as an unhealthy coping mechanism for teens to manage traumatic symptoms. Although it provides temporary relief, it ultimately causes more harm than good by increasing shame, fear, and emotional distress. It also delays trauma recovery.

How Trauma Impacts a Teen's Mental Health

Trauma compromises a teen's sense of safety and ability to trust. Many trauma survivors experience intense sadness, fear, hopelessness, panic attacks, withdrawal from friends, sleep issues, lack of motivation, and suicidal thoughts. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects approximately 7-8% of the adolescent population.

Trauma disrupts healthy development in teens. It can negatively impact their self-esteem, relationships, and academic performance. Trauma treatment typically involves processing past events and learning coping strategies to improve functioning.

Many trauma survivors experience intense feelings related to sadness, fear, hopelessness, and shame. They may also experience other [related symptoms](#), including:

- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Panic attacks
- Appetite issues
- Interpersonal problems
- Withdrawal from friends and/or family
- Hypervigilance
- Unexplained aches and pains
- Racing thoughts
- Anhedonia (lack of pleasure in usual activities)
- Suicidal thoughts



Sometimes these symptoms occur just after the event and decrease on their own. However, in cases of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), these symptoms may persist for several months or years. Research indicates that approximately 7-8% of the U.S. population will have PTSD during their lifetime.

While each person responds to trauma differently, it can undoubtedly impact every area of someone's functioning. Trauma can disrupt their self-esteem, affect the quality of their relationships, and impact work and school performance.

What Parents Can Do

If you notice warning signs of self-harm or trauma in your teen, don't ignore them. Speak to your child compassionately and seek professional help right away. With caring support from loved ones and evidence-based treatment, teens can recover.