

8th GRADE: SELF-HARM & SUICIDE

LESSON 2 OVERVIEW



There Is A Better Way!



Lesson Time:

30 Minutes

Materials Provided:

- Handout: "There Is A Better Way Handout" (printed one per student)

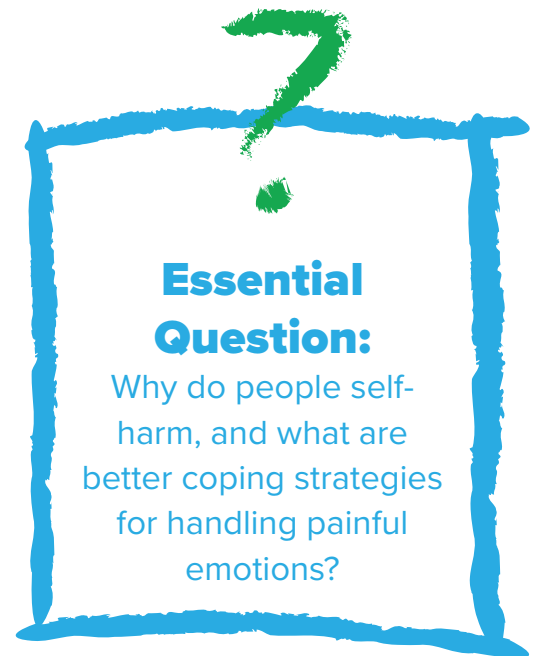
Materials Needed:

- Writing Utensils

Objectives:

Students will be able to...

1. Define self-injury.
2. Recognize various methods of self-injury.
3. Understand contributing factors influencing self-injury behaviors.
4. Recognize warning signs of self-injury.
5. Learn alternative coping strategies to self-injury behaviors.



Nonspecific Self-Injury



Lesson Introduction: (2 minutes)

In our previous lesson, we talked about mental health and how to recognize signs of stress, depression, and anxiety. We discussed how we are quick to take care of ourselves when we are physically sick, and how we feel comfortable telling others about our physical pains and symptoms because we want to feel better. Mental health can be compared to physical health. It is just as important to take care of our mental health as it is our physical health. When feeling mentally unwell, it is essential to reach out for help, just as we do when we see a doctor or nurse when we feel physically ill.

Every person develops coping strategies when they experience mental health challenges. Unfortunately, some strategies used for coping with stress, anxiety, depression, and other difficult emotions are unhealthy and can be dangerous. Today, we are going to discuss an unhealthy coping strategy called self-injury. Most of you have probably heard it referred to as self-harm and are somewhat familiar with what it means. However, proper knowledge is the key to preventing self-harm and helping others who may be using self-harm as a form of trying to cope with problems and challenges in life.

As we begin our lesson, I am going to hand out a graphic organizer for you to complete as we explore this complex and delicate topic. Our goal for today is to increase our knowledge and learn better, healthier ways to cope with tough emotions. Healthy coping skills will improve our mindset and equip us to push through tough times instead of reacting in unhealthy ways that cause our situation to spiral out of control. I am going to write three columns on the board to guide our notes for our discussion today. We will focus on three areas: “What?”, “Why?”, and “What To Do!”

Core Lesson, Part 1: WHAT? (7 minutes)

What is self-harm? On your handout write the definition of self-harm. *(Pause to give students time to think and write down their answers.)* Did your answer sound similar to this definition? Self-harm is “Non-suicidal self-injury, deliberately harming the surface of one’s own body.” According to the National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI), “Self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior that indicates a need for better coping skills.” Think about that sentence. Let me read it again as you fill in the blanks on your paper. “Self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior that indicates a need for better coping skills.” Healthy coping skills can be learned and implemented to defeat self-injury behaviors. Next on your paper, list ways that you have heard a person might intentionally injure him or herself. *(Give some time for students to brainstorm and list their answers on their papers individually. Allow students to share their answers. The most common form of self-harm is cutting, others that may be mentioned include burning, hitting, carving, scratching, or pulling hair.)* The answers you have shared are correct. The reason we are talking about this information is to help you recognize these behaviors in someone who could need help and intervention. Self-injury is serious and is an unhealthy way to cope with stressors, confusion, and difficult feelings.

Core Lesson, Part 2: WHY? (8 minutes)

Feelings are real. You may feel sad, angry, happy, frustrated, confused, disappointed, stressed, excited, nervous, scared, surprised, etc. Some feelings are positive and enjoyable, others are not. Feelings change and can pile on us all at once. It is probably no surprise to you that we rarely feel just one emotion at a time. For example, if you received a bad grade, you may feel angry because it mattered, disappointed because you studied, worried because of your parent’s reaction, embarrassed because others didn’t make a bad grade, and jealous of people who don’t have to study. It’s a whirlwind of emotions all at once. Take a look at the picture on your handout. What do you see? Who can explain how that picture can represent tough, hard feelings? *(Allow students to*

Core Lesson (cont)

elaborate on this idea.) When we experience several negative, tough feelings or emotions, they can twist, and come together to potentially leave us feeling tightly wound, overwhelmed, and even out of control. This is when we must implement healthy coping skills. Healthy coping skills equip us to push through tough situations, difficult circumstances, and strong negative emotions.

Did you know? “For 12-14% of adolescents, self-harm is used to cope with emotional distress, trauma, or mental health struggles, despite its inherent dangers, social unacceptability, and ineffectiveness as a long-term strategy. Let’s refer to your handout again, next to WHY, write your thoughts on the next two questions. Why do you think 12-14% of peers your age choose an unhealthy path like self-injury rather than healthy coping strategies? How can we change this? *(Allow students a minute to write their responses on paper. Allow a few students to share their answers.)*

Adolescence can be a transitional struggle. Peer pressure, academic performance, changes in relationships and friendships, trouble at home, and poor self-image can all lead to stress and a whirlwind of emotions we aren’t sure how to handle. For adolescents who experiment with self-injury, the stress becomes so extreme and their reactions lead to destructive solutions. Their negative response to stressors only adds layers to their problem giving it more power and strength over them. It is like a tornado gaining strength and growing more violent and destructive. Any form of relief felt from self-harm is extremely temporary and the immediate aftermath makes the person feel many negative emotions.

Let’s consider common motives for people who self-harm...

- To distract themselves - from something difficult

- Change the focus - redirect their attention from the uncontrollable

- To attempt to regain control - over their minds when experiencing difficult thoughts

- Release tension - associated with those strong emotions

- Feel - to feel something physical when they are otherwise numb

- Express themselves - to express strong emotions they are feeling and struggle to otherwise articulate

- Punish themselves - this could be a result of guilt

As a matter of fact, studies even suggest that self-harm can release chemicals in the brain that might make people think their stress is relieved for a short amount of time. This short-lived relief can in turn lead to habits adding to the stress and anxiety leading to worse situations later. An interesting fact to add is self-harm is less common in upper grades partially because friends and other loved ones have learned to speak up and get help for the person so that they can learn new and more effective ways to cope with difficulties.

Core Lesson, Part 3: WHAT TO DO? (12 minutes)

Why do you think it is important to recognize the signs that others are hurting themselves? *(Pause... allow students to respond.)* The average age for adolescents who begin to engage in self-harm is thirteen. Discussion of this topic now at a young age, learning about the “What, Why, and What to Do” will allow you to use this knowledge to learn positive ways to deal with strong emotions instead of resorting to destructive behaviors. It will also help you speak up and help a peer you see who needs help.

Remember our tornado image? When our weather system alerts us of a tornado approaching, what do we do? *(Allow students time to respond.)* We prepare! We implement our tornado plan, whether that be going to your basement, going to the center room in your house away from windows, going to a community safe shelter, or putting your helmet on, etc. We know the storm is coming and we can do things to prepare. The same is true with strong, negative emotions. When we experience difficult times we implement our healthy coping strategies plan! We are going to think about that today in just a few minutes!

Core Lesson (cont)

But first, if you observe self-injury behavior in a friend or peer, it might be a little frightening. You know it is an unsafe behavior. You care about your friends and do not want to see them hurting physically or emotionally. How you handle the situation when you see signs of these behaviors is important and is another reason we are talking about this today. Recognizing the signs and being familiar with the reasons are your first steps to help that friend.

In order to be prepared to recognize and help someone who might be harming himself or herself, you need to be able to distinguish between myths and facts. I am going to read several statements. Write M for Myth and F for Fact in the correct place on your handout.

(Give students time to decide; then share the correct answer.)

1	Only girls self-harm.	MYTH: Girls are more likely to self-harm, however, self-injury behaviors occur in both males and females.
2	People harm themselves to express or release distressing emotions.	FACT: Self-harm can be a way of communicating, without words, an intense mental struggle.
3	People who hurt themselves are suicidal.	MYTH: Self-harm is an unhealthy coping skill used to attempt emotional relief, but suicide is a permanent decision to end life.
4	People harm themselves just to get attention.	MYTH: Many who self-harm hide the proof. They may wear long sleeves or hurt themselves in places not seen in normal clothing. If the evidence is in plain sight it might be a cry for help. Looking for help does not mean seeking attention.
5	Self-harm is a way of coping.	FACT: It is important for this person to get help from a trusted adult/professional and learn positive coping skills versus negative coping skills.

There are two important words I want you to remember from today’s lesson: prevention and intervention. Prevention is information and efforts implemented before there is a problem to try to “prevent” it from becoming a problem. Compare it to when you were little and your parents taught you to not touch the oven because it was hot. They didn’t want you to learn the hard way by touching the oven and getting hurt. Their goal was to try and “prevent” an accident by teaching you what HOT meant. Intervention, on the other hand, is providing help “after” someone is already experiencing the problem. A drug addict has to have an intervention. They are already in the middle of the problem and need help. Which is the better, easier road? Prevention or intervention? *(Allow the students to respond.)* It is much easier to never start a destructive behavior, like drugs or self-harm. Today’s lesson is an example of prevention. As you learn more, grow older, and get to know more people, you may find yourself having to be part of someone’s intervention. At your age, your biggest job would be to refer that person to a trusted adult.

Core Lesson (cont)



What are some positive ways to address the needs of someone who self-harms? Jot a few of the answers in the box provided on your handout.

1. Be an active listener to that friend.
2. Express your concern that they must be experiencing very difficult emotions.
3. Do not be judgmental.
4. Encourage them to come with you to talk to a trusted adult. This is the MOST important of all. You MUST tell a trusted adult whether he or she comes with you or not. Getting help is above everything else. They should not deal with these emotions alone.

Positive Coping Skills

To end our lesson today, I want us to brainstorm healthy coping strategies. We should all have a plan to implement these when we go through tough times. Just like we have a tornado-ready plan, we should have a healthy coping strategies plan. This plan can help prevent or replace self-destructive tendencies and a negative mindset. I want you to think about some of the things that you do that are positive and help you when you are sad, mad, frustrated, or having a difficult time. List these in the appropriate space on your worksheet.

Now let's share. Raise your hand if you'd like to share an idea you wrote.

(Give students time to respond.)

Those are all great ideas!

To conclude today I want to summarize and share with you several additional options to consider and add to your plan.

- Take care of yourself. Proper nutrition, rest, and sleep are important. Do not overeat or starve yourself. Plan time for healthy eating and get at least 7 hours of sleep a night.
- Exercise! This is a positive way to increase endorphins naturally.
- Find good outlets for your energy - draw, paint, listen to music, write, build, play sports, or volunteer in your community.
- Talk to someone you trust. Allow yourself to voice and communicate your emotions.
- Identify trusted friends and adults. Ask for help whenever needed.
- Call a hotline if you don't feel comfortable talking face-to-face with someone you know. These are listed on the top of your handout.
- Concentrate on the good. Whatever you focus on increases. Think more about what you are grateful for. Journal about the good in your life.
- Forgive. Rescue anger by working toward forgiveness—even forgiving yourself.
- Be kind to yourself by positive self-talk. Be your own friend.
- Set reasonable expectations for yourself. Perfectionism is not realistic.
- Create positive feelings (avoid numbness) by listening to music, getting sunlight, praying, and being creative.
- Help others! Many times when you put your energy into helping others you focus less on yourself and more on the other person.
- Talk to a family member, pastor at church, school counselor, teacher, coach, resource officer, or trusted friend.

Core Lesson (cont)



Closing: (1 minute)

Self-harm is like storm damage. It is an action with a damaging consequence. We can replace the damaging action of self-harm with a positive coping action. We must protect ourselves from the emotional storms of life because we all will experience some storms here and there. What can we do to replace the damaging actions of self-harm? (*Allow students to respond.*) Yes, we all need a positive self-care plan.

Our emotions are like the wind. We can't see them, but we can feel them. When we begin to feel more than just a gentle breeze of emotions, that's when we need to use our coping skills. We all have different problems, therefore we all have unique coping skills that work best for each of us. Just like tornadoes change paths and turn in different directions, our emotions can too. Our positive coping skills give us the power to change the wind of emotions. Just like with the weather, emotional storms will pass, and there will be beautiful days ahead. Often immediately after a big storm, even hurricanes, the weather is the most beautiful. Brace yourself for the storms in life with a positive self-care plan. You have the power to change the wind and gain strength with each obstacle you face.

Essential Question:

Why do people self-harm, and what are better coping strategies for handling painful emotions is the essential question for this lesson. We have learned that students who choose self-harm are attempting to meet an emotional need with ineffective and unhealthy actions. Self-harm in no way can improve any situation. Instead, we must learn to choose effective, positive skills like the ones we explored today to help us endure the difficult challenges we are faced with.

References:

1. Self-harm. Crisis Text Line. (2023a, March 3). <https://www.crisistextline.org/topics/self-harm/#what-is-self-harm-1>
2. Hackensack Meridian Health Carrier Clinic. (n.d.). <https://www.hackensackmeridianhealth.org/en/Locations/Hackensack-Meridian-Health-Carrier-Clinic>
3. Bruce. (2022, September 1). Understanding self-injury/ self-harm. Mental Health Literacy. <https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/understanding-self-injury-self-harm/>
4. 6 reasons why people self-injure. MentalHelp.net. (2019, March 27). <https://www.mentalhelp.net/suicide/6-reasons-why-people-self-injure/>
5. Self-Harm Myths and Facts. Penumbra. (2019, May 28). <https://www.penumbra.org.uk/>

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Name: _____

Date: _____

Self-Harm - There Is A Better Way

Suicide Prevention Helpline 1-800-273-8255

Crisis Hotline Text 741741

Self-Harm means...

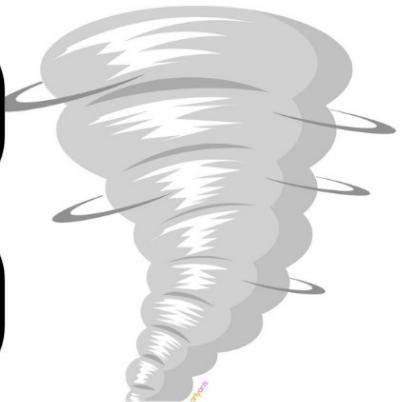
According to the National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI),
“Self-harm is not a _____, but a _____ that indicates a
need for better _____.”

WHAT

WHY

Reasons someone might self-harm:

How can we make a difference and help change the statistic that 12-14% of adolescents self-harm?



MYTH or FACT

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

WHAT TO DO

Postive ways to address the needs:

Healthy Coping Strategies Plan:

Name: _____

Date: _____

Self-Harm - There Is A Better Way

Suicide Prevention Helpline 1-800-273-8255

Crisis Hotline Text 741741

Self-Harm means... intentionally hurting yourself physically, without the intent to end your life.

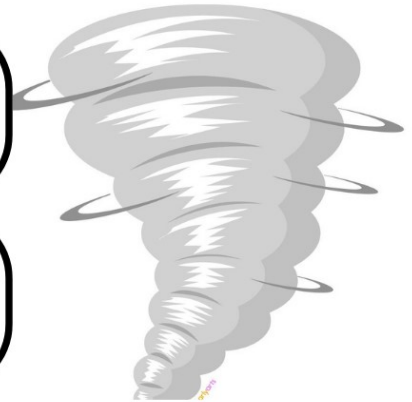
According to the National Alliance of Mental Health (NAMI), "Self-harm is not a mental illness, but a behavior that indicates a need for better coping skills."

WHAT	Cutting	Burning	Hitting
	Carving	Scratching	Pulling Hair

WHY

Reasons someone might self-harm:
Possible answers might include peer pressure, academic pressure, change in relationships, and challenges with self-identity or self-esteem.

How can we make a difference and help change the statistic that 12-14% of adolescents self-harm?
Answers will have something to do with how important prevention is and how peers are an integral part in recognizing signs in others and getting help.



MYTH OR FACT

1. **M** 2. **F** 3. **M** 4. **M** 5. **F**

WHAT TO DO

Positive ways to address the needs:

1. Be an active listener to that friend.
2. Express your concern that they must be experiencing very difficult emotions.
3. Do not be judgmental.
4. Encourage them to come with you to talk to a trusted adult. This is the MOST important of all! You MUST tell a trusted adult whether he or she comes with you or not. Getting help is above everything else. They should not deal with these emotions alone.

Healthy Coping Strategies Plan:

The student should choose three or four of the positive coping skills discussed that fit their personal needs in developing their own individualized plan.