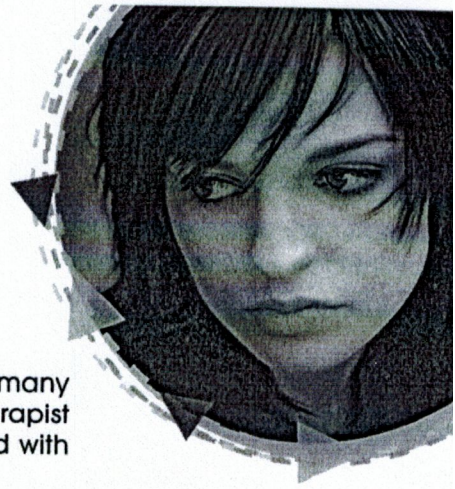

Deep **secrets**

Self-harming behaviour in a teen is a painful part of parenthood and a phase many parents fear they are too ill equipped to handle. Deirdre Hayes, Family Therapist at THE COUNSELLING PLACE, offers advice and breaks stigmas associated with self-inflicted injuries.

Many teenagers who begin hurting themselves often inflict injuries on their bodies through the acts of cutting, picking and hitting – all usually indicating distress or a cry for help because they feel some part of their life is just not going the way they want it to. Frequently, it could also be a form of stress management, their way of relieving frustration or a result of feeling isolated, low or having poor self-esteem. For many youths, self-harming becomes a habitual way of dealing with difficult stresses.

Take Mary*, for instance, the mother of Jane*, a 15-year-old girl who had been cutting her arms. When Mary noticed and questioned Jane about the injuries, Jane brushed it away quite a number of times before finally admitting to it. Jane was always known by her parents to be a responsible girl who studied hard in school. They knew she was shy by nature and didn't have a huge group of friends, but little did they know she was so unhappy. Jane actually had a big fall out with her only friend in school, and this triggered her self-harming behaviour. Her parents not only worry, but they feel like they're walking on eggshells for fear of her doing something more serious to herself.

This case scenario may have you wondering if Jane's self-harming behaviour could lead to suicide. During behavioural studies, when researchers survey youths after an episode of self-harm, only a small group report being suicidal. Not all children who harm themselves are suicidal, but they are at a higher risk of suicidal tendencies if their distress escalates.

If you have a self-harming teen, then it's important to take your adolescent's behaviour seriously and tune in to what's affecting them. Be aware of the danger signs that point to your teen becoming more distressed or suicidal, such as a deteriorating mood, becoming isolated or expressing an intention to harm himself or herself. Encourage your teen to express his or her feelings openly and be prepared to seek emergency support services if necessary.

There are some stigmas associated with self-harming behaviour. As such, it is important to distinguish the myths from the facts:

Myth: Those who cut and self-injure are trying to get attention.
Fact: On the contrary, people who self-harm generally do so in secrecy. They aren't trying to manipulate others or draw attention to themselves. In fact, shame and fear can make it very difficult to come forward and ask for help.

Myth: People who self-injure are crazy and/or dangerous.
Fact: Many teens who engage in self-harm suffer from anxiety, depression or a previous trauma – just like millions of others in the general population. Self-injury is how they cope. Labelling them as 'crazy' or 'dangerous' isn't accurate or helpful.

Myth: People who self-injure want to die.
Fact: Usually, self-harming individuals do not want to die. When they engage in self-harm, they are not trying to kill themselves – they are trying to cope with their pain. In fact, self-injury may be a form of them helping themselves to go on living. However, in the long term, people who self-injure have a much higher risk of suicide, which is why it's so important to seek help.

Myth: If the wounds aren't bad, it's not that serious.
Fact: The severity of their wounds has very little to do with how much he or she may be suffering. Don't assume that because the wounds or injuries are minor, there's nothing to worry about.

If you discover your teen has self-harming behaviour, you must avoid criticism and judgmental comments. Although it can be distressing for you to discover your teen harming himself or herself, it's important to look at the issue in a positive light. Your awareness means their unhappiness is out in the open, so you can do something about it. And it opens up a new level of communication between your teen and you. Bring up the subject in a caring, non-confrontational way and let your teen know you're available whenever he or she wants to talk.

Did you know?

Self-injury does not only happen among teenagers and young women, but it also occurs with older, middle-aged females and males. Because adult self-injury behaviour can be very ingrained, it can be challenging to find other coping techniques, so seek help early. For adults, self-harm may be one of the few areas of their lives in which they feel in control of, hence the reluctance to change. Triggers of adult self-harm must first be identified and new coping strategies put in place.

Finally, understand why your teen engages in self-harm, and if they are unsure, seek help from a psychotherapist or counsellor to help them identify what feelings they are having and how to deal with them. F

**names have been changed*

Deirdre Hayes *Family Therapist*

Deirdre holds a Masters Degree in Systemic Psychotherapy from the National University of Ireland, Dublin, a Postgraduate qualification in Social Work, as well as Healthcare Management. She is also a qualified Mediator and a certified *Emergenetics® Associate.*

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The Counselling Place
7500A Beach Road
#04-323 The Plaza (S) 199591
Tel: 6887 3695
Fax: 6396 0929
Web: www.thecounsellingplace.com
Email: admin@thecounsellingplace.com

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