

Preventing suicide at Lake Tahoe: Self harm is a cry for help

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Special to the Tribune



Often, one who self-harms may attempt to hide the injuries from others.

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TAHOE-TRUCKEE, Calif. — Self-harm is the act of deliberately harming your own body. It is a way of expressing and dealing with emotional pain. Being in a pattern of self-harm and destruction of one's body can make suicide all the more likely by demonstrating an individual's inability to cope in healthy ways with psychological pain.

While there is a momentary sense of release and calm experienced often by those that self-harm, it is usually followed by notable shame and guilt, and the return of the untreated emotions that led to the initial self-harm.

Due to the impulsive nature of self-harm, it is likely to be linked to a mental health disorder, such as depression, or an eating disorder. It is not one single thing that provokes self-harm or self-injury, rather, it is usually a warning of emotional distress that could be caused by a number of things.

Through self-harm, the individual may be attempting to:

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- Self-punish for perceived fault or guilt.
- Communicate depression to the outside world.

- Express internal feelings.
- Feel a sense of control over life situations.
- Reduce anxiety and provide a sense of relief.

Often, one who self-harms may attempt to hide the injuries from others. Some signs and symptoms include:

- Scars from cuts or burns.
- Claiming to have frequent accidents.
- Behavioral and emotional instability, impulsive actions.
- Statements of hopelessness.
- Wearing long sleeves or long pants even in hot weather.

Anyone can be at risk of inflicting self-injury. There are certain risk factors that may increase those risks:

- Females are at greater risk of self-harm.
- Teenagers and young adults are at the highest risk as they face peer pressure and conflicts with parents and other authority figures.
- Those that already experience mental health issues or personality disorders.
- Individuals who have experienced neglect, sexual abuse, or a tumultuous family life.
- Having friends that self-harm increases the likelihood of personal self-injury.

While it can be frightening to discover a loved one is self-harming, finding the appropriate treatment and getting help can teach healthy coping strategies and help to prevent suicide.

Reach out for help if you or someone you love is self-harming. Any form of self-injury is a cry for help, and a warning sign of larger issues that need to be addressed.

It can be scary to discover instances of self-harm. It is OK to let someone know his or her self-injury frightens you. It is also OK to acknowledge if something is beyond your abilities and you need outside help. Expressing concern is important, but it is equally as important to gently discuss the topic and not to scold or yell.

Avoiding expressions of anger will aid in maintaining an open dialogue when discussing a difficult situation.

If you or a loved one is experiencing thoughts of suicide or severe emotional distress, get help immediately. Take all discussion of suicide seriously. If you think an individual is in immediate danger do not leave him or her alone. Call 911. If it is safe to do so, remove any tools that could be used for self-harm.

Sarah McClarie is the facilitator for the Tahoe Truckee Youth Suicide Prevention Coalition. Contact her at smccclarie@ttusd.org or by calling 530-582-2560.

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