

Lorraine Platt ✧ Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist
Teen Solutions - Support for Young Adults and their Families

The Cutting Epidemic: Why Teen Girls Are Harming Themselves

In my practice as a therapist, the majority of clients I see are teen girls and their parents. In the past year, most teen girls I've met with are currently cutting themselves or have done so in the recent past. There are a variety of reasons why cutting has recently become so common for this gender and age group. Like drinking alcohol or using drugs, cutting is used to relieve pain, stress and tension. Girls (and some boys) have found that creating physical pain externalizes and distracts them from their internal emotional pain. They cut themselves to reduce the accumulated internal pressure.

Because teen girls tend to please and accommodate in order to be accepted, they often hide their real emotions. They're also in a phase of development where they share less with their parents, so they may be suffering in silence. In Marin County, where the social norm is a presentation of perfection, girls feel grossly inadequate. This is experienced both internally and externally, even when they are seen as attractive and likeable by others. There can be a competitive quality to being good enough, whether it's academically or through their appearance. This can turn girls against each other or create isolation and jealousy when another girl is seen as superior.

Once they have started cutting, the isolation is even greater. They try to stop but are unable to because the emotional issues that caused the behavior haven't been addressed yet. There can be an addictive quality to cutting. Like any behavior that provides pain relief such as drinking or overeating, it's difficult to control once the person starts to rely on it, especially if they have no other way to handle their feelings. Sometimes girls start by poking themselves with sharp objects like pins. They want to see how it feels because they've heard about their friends doing it. If they discover it works to reduce pain, they use razor blades or knives to increase the impact.

Often parents bring their daughters to see me because they notice cuts on their arms or legs. Parents are concerned and don't know what to do. All they know is that their child is suffering and needs help. Sometimes they fear that cutting is a failed suicide attempt. Girls who cut themselves usually are depressed, anxious or overwhelmed, which could lead to a suicide attempt if the feelings aren't addressed immediately. However, the recovery rate is very high once girls start expressing their feelings directly, especially if the behavior is caught early.

One sign that a girl might be cutting is if she regularly wears long sleeves on hot days to cover her arms. Also, finding loose razor blades in the bathroom or her bedroom should be a red flag. Ask your daughter about any warning signs that you notice. Even if she is cutting, she may deny it at first because of her shame or fear of anger and punishment. If she's going to open up, she needs to know it's safe and that the person will be understanding, even though they're concerned. Make sure you're calm when you approach your daughter so you can listen with an open mind. She needs to know you can handle her feelings and will help her through it. Talk to a friend or counselor first to deal with your own alarm so that you can be available to your daughter when she needs you.

It's crucial for her physical health and emotional survival that she learns how to turn her destruction against herself into something constructive. She needs to learn to express her emotions directly to prevent future self-harm. If your daughter is withdrawn or having unexplained outbursts, something needs attention. Take it seriously and seek help right away. Follow your instincts and trust what you see if you think something is wrong. Your responsiveness is key to her success since teens often have difficulty asking for help.

I've been working with parents and teen girls for 15 years. I specialize in healing trauma, addictions, eating disorders and family relationship issues. My passion is bringing families together in a spirit of collaboration that supports everyone.

415-302-1700 ✧ lorraine@teensolutionsmarin.com
311 Miller Avenue, Suite E ✧ Mill Valley, CA 94941