

Self-Harm and Paths to Care:

How to Recognize Signs of
Distress and Seek Support



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Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for teachers who want to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' mental health and are looking for ways to support and guide them in their daily school life.

A Possible Story

Mar 2020 WHO Declares Pandemic

Feb 2020

First case of Covid-19 in Brazil

Jan 2021

Start of vaccination

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lucas, a 14-year-old student, believed he would only be away from school for a few days. At first, he and his classmates imagined that everything would soon return to normal. However, the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months of remote learning, separation from friends, and sudden changes to his routine.

As time went on, Lucas began to become quieter. He participated less in online classes, avoided turning on his camera, and turned in assignments late. At home, he missed his friends, worried about his family's financial difficulties, and spent much of his time alone. Gradually, he began to have trouble sleeping, experience anxiety attacks, and feel frequent bouts of sadness and emptiness.

When in-person classes resumed, his teachers noticed that he was no longer the same student. Lucas seemed distant, got irritated easily, and avoided interacting with his classmates. On some days, he wore long-sleeved shirts even during warmer periods.

Apr 2022

Easing of measures,
increased vaccination.

Pandemic slows
down;
public health
emergency ends.

May 2023

In a moment of intense emotional distress, Lucas engaged in self-harm. Later, he managed to explain that he didn't want to die. According to him, hurting his own body was an attempt to relieve—even if only for a few moments—the emotional pain he had been carrying for months.

Jan 2025

Ressaca
psicológica
pós-pandemia,
esquecimento
coletivo de
aprendizados

One of the teachers noticed that something wasn't right. She wanted to help, but didn't know what to say. She was afraid to ask directly and “encourage” the behavior. She also feared saying something inappropriate and making the situation worse. Caught between concern and uncertainty, she felt unprepared to deal with that student's suffering. Over time, Lucas began to hide his injuries and avoided talking about how he felt for fear of being judged by his classmates or seen as someone who wanted attention.

Lucas's story reflects the reality experienced by many students during and after the pandemic. It also portrays a common experience among teachers and education professionals: realizing that a student is suffering, wanting to offer help, but not knowing exactly how to support them, talk to them, and address the situation safely and carefully.

What Is Self-Harm?

Self-harm occurs when someone intentionally injures their own body in an attempt to cope with intense emotional pain. In the vast majority of cases, the person is not trying to take their own life; they are simply looking for a way to alleviate, pause, or express suffering that has become too heavy to bear.

Among the most common behaviors are:

- **Cutting**
- **Burns**
- **Repetitive scratching**
- **Hitting oneself**
- **Skin punctures**
- **Deliberate exposure to risky situations**

We need to make this clear: hurting yourself is never “being dramatic,” a “lack of strength,” or a way to “get attention.” It’s a clear sign that your mind is screaming for help and that you’ve exhausted your resources for coping with what you’re feeling.

Even if it’s not a suicide attempt, **self-harm is a red flag**. It shows that suffering is increasing, and over time, the risk of something more serious happening becomes real. **That’s why this pain should never be ignored**: it requires close attention, support, and help from a healthcare professional.



Why does it happen?

Research shows that self-harm can serve different purposes. Most of the time, there isn't a single reason: the cause behind this behavior varies depending on the person's life story, the circumstances they're currently facing, and the intensity of their emotional distress.

Emotional Regulation:

Self-harm can function as an attempt to relieve very intense emotions, such as sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, or a feeling of being overwhelmed.

Example:

During the pandemic, Lucas spent months away from his friends and his school routine. Over time, he began to feel a lot of sadness and anxiety, but he had trouble talking about what he was feeling. At times, self-harm emerged as an attempt to temporarily relieve this emotional pain.



Reducing the feeling of emptiness:

Some people describe a feeling of emptiness, as if they were disconnected from their own feelings or from the people around them.

Example:

When in-person classes resumed, Lucas seemed distant from his classmates and the activities he used to enjoy. Even when surrounded by people, he felt alone and emotionally disconnected. At times, physical pain seemed to be a way for him to feel something in the face of this emptiness.

Self-punishment:

Self-harm can also occur when a person begins to blame themselves excessively or to believe that they deserve to suffer.

Example:

During the period of remote learning, Lucas began to have trouble keeping up with his schoolwork. Gradually, he started to feel that he was letting his family and teachers down. When something went wrong, he blamed only himself and felt that he wasn't good enough.



Expressing Distress:

In some cases, self-harm can be a way of expressing pain that a person cannot put into words.

Example:

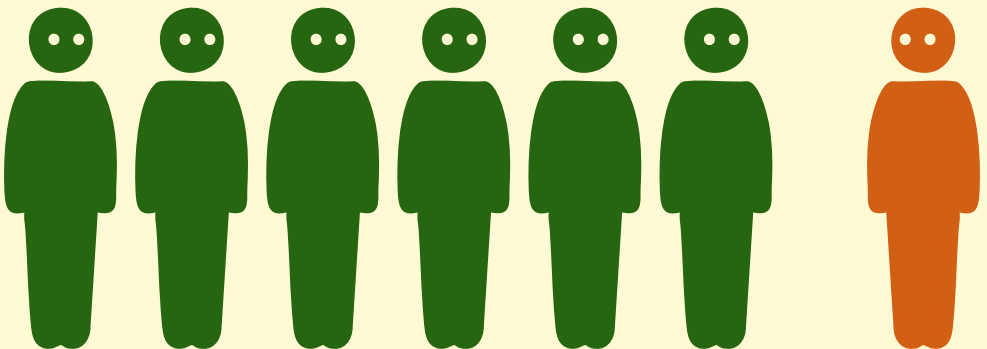
Lucas's teachers noticed changes in his behavior. He was more withdrawn, participated less in class, and avoided talking to his classmates. Although they were concerned, many didn't know how to broach the subject or how to help him. Meanwhile, Lucas continued to suffer in silence, unable to find a way to show how much he needed help.

What do WHO studies reveal about students?

The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that adolescents were one of the groups most affected by the psychosocial consequences of the pandemic. School closures, prolonged social isolation, disrupted routines, and reduced access to mental health services contributed to increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, and risky behaviors, including self-harm.

The WHO also notes that:

- 1 in 7 adolescents aged 10 to 19 lives with a mental disorder;
- Anxiety and depression are among the leading health problems in this age group;
- Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people;
- Academic difficulties, isolation, and social exclusion increase vulnerability to psychological distress.



What do studies show about students?

Research conducted after the pandemic shows that children and adolescents experienced a significant increase in emotional distress. Being away from school, the loss of social interaction with friends, changes in routine, and the difficulties faced by families directly impacted their mental health.

Such as:

Anxiety

Persistent sadness

Feelings of loneliness

Learning difficulties

Behavioral problems

Self-harming behaviors

How Can I Help?

Listen Without Judgment

Ex: "Thank you for trusting me enough to talk about this. I want to listen to you and understand what you're going through."

Ask Directly, But Gently

Ex: "I understand you're going through a difficult time. However, hurting yourself isn't the best way to deal with it. How about we talk? You can count on me."

Show interest in the conversation

Ex: "Would you like to tell me a little more about how you've been feeling these past few days?"

Encourage them to seek professional help

Ex: "You don't have to go through all this alone. I think talking to a psychologist could really help, and I can help you find that support."

Validating emotions reduces risk.

Avoid Phrases Like:



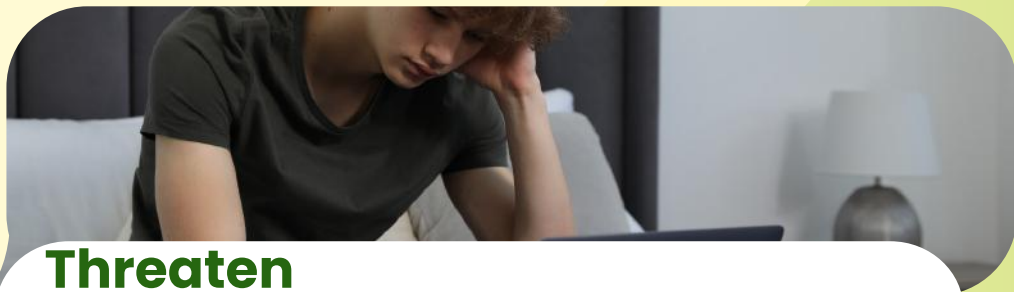
Minimizing

Ex: "That's just being dramatic"; "It's a lack of faith in God"; "You're just doing that to get attention"; "You're too weak"; "Self-harm is just a fad—it'll pass soon"



Punishing

Ex: "If you keep this up, no one will want to be around you." "If you do that again, you'll lose all your friends."



Threaten

Ex: "Look what you're doing—I'm going to tell your parents." "What you're trying to do by hurting yourself is manipulate people." "If you keep this up, you'll end up in the hospital."

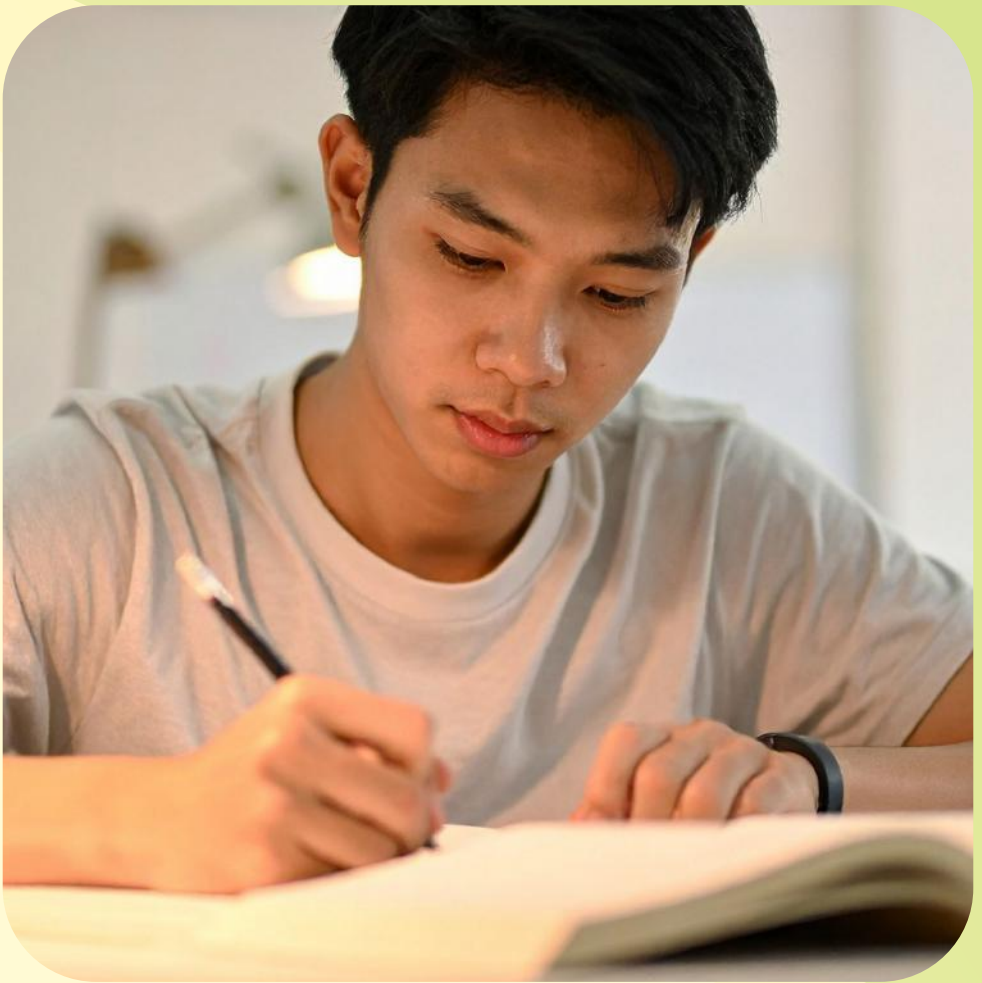
Alternative Strategies

Create a safety plan

A safety plan is like an emergency roadmap for times when an emotional crisis strikes. In it, the child or teen can write down the signs that show they're not doing well, activities that help them calm down, and the names of trusted people they can talk to when they need help.

Ex: After spending months feeling sad, lonely, and overwhelmed, Lucas realized that certain thoughts and emotions tend to arise before the urge to harm himself. With the help of a professional, he put together a safety plan with strategies to help him calm down, as well as contact information for family members, friends, and professionals he could reach out to when in crisis.





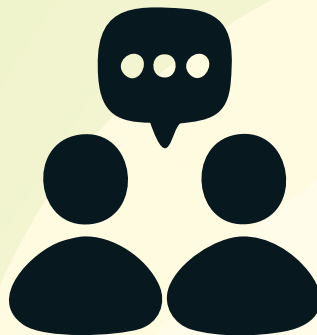
Writing down how you feel

Writing can help release emotions that are trapped inside your head. Often, when we put our thoughts on paper, we're better able to understand what we're feeling.

Ex: Lucas began writing about how much he missed his friends, the difficulties he faced during the pandemic, and the worries he carried in silence. Little by little, he realized that writing helped him organize his thoughts and identify moments when he was feeling the saddest or most distressed.

Talking to people you trust

Talking about your pain can lessen the feeling of being alone. Having someone who listens without criticism or judgment helps lift some of the emotional burden.



Ex: When he was feeling really down, Lucas started talking to his mom, a close friend, and a school counselor. Even though his problems didn't disappear right away, knowing that there were people willing to listen made him feel less alone.



Get some exercise

Moving your body can help relieve tension, anxiety, and pent-up emotions. In addition, exercise can bring a sense of relief and well-being after a while.

Ex: On days when he felt most distressed, Lucas started playing soccer with his classmates after school and riding his bike around the neighborhood. These moments helped reduce the emotional pressure that had been building up over time.

What if it's with you?

Self-harm is an attempt to cope with something that hurts too much. But there are safer and more effective ways to deal with that pain.

A young man with curly hair, wearing a white t-shirt and a backpack, is holding a pink folder. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a light yellow-green gradient.

**You're
not
weak.**

Where to Find Help?

UBS - Basic Health Unit

This is the first point of contact for accessing psychiatric and psychological services through the public health system. From there, you can receive guidance and be referred to specific mental health services.

CAPS - Psychosocial Care Center

This is a specialized mental health service for those who need more intensive care with long-term follow-up.

CVV (188) - Center for the Value of Life

This is a nonprofit organization that seeks to help people experiencing emotional distress. This service assists with suicide prevention and can be reached by dialing 188, helping those who are feeling lonely and need a non-judgmental conversation.

Psychology Teaching Clinics

These are clinics affiliated with psychology programs where senior undergraduate students provide supervised counseling to people seeking therapy. The services are affordable or even free at some universities.

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