

# Self-Harm and Paths to care:

What Have We Learned  
from the Pandemic?



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# Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is intended for anyone who has faced the challenges of the pandemic and wants to understand how this period has affected our mental health.

# A Possible Story

Mar 2020

WHO Declares  
Pandemic

Feb 2020

First case of  
Covid-19 in Brazil

At first, he thought it would just be a temporary break. A few days without school, without traffic, without routine. But weeks turned into months. Without friends, without soccer in the late afternoon, without daily contact with classmates, his room became his world.



His cell phone became his main companion. At home, the atmosphere also changed. His mother lost part of her income. His father became more irritable. Arguments became frequent. Fear of the disease, constant news about deaths, and financial insecurity created a tense environment...

Lucas began to feel suffocated. He felt anxious upon waking up. At night, his mind wouldn't stop racing. He thought he was letting his family down. He thought he was a burden. He felt guilty for not being "okay" when so many people were suffering. His emotions became too intense.

Jan 2021

Start of  
vaccination



Pandemic slows down;  
public health  
emergency ends.

**May 2023**

**Apr 2022**

Easing of measures,  
increased vaccination.

**Jan 2025**

Post-pandemic  
psychological  
hangover,  
collective  
forgetting of  
lessons learned.



One day, after an argument at home, he locked himself in his room. The anguish seemed unbearable... It was at that moment that he hurt himself for the first time. He didn't want to die. He wanted that inner pain to subside. After the cut, there was a brief sense of relief. As if the tension had drained away. But soon after came the shame and the fear that someone would find out.

Lucas continued to hide what he was feeling. He wore long sleeves. He avoided deep conversations. On the outside, he seemed like just another quiet young man during the pandemic. On the inside, he was fighting alone.

# What is self-harm?

Self-harm occurs when a person intentionally injures their own body as a way to cope with intense emotional pain. Often, they are unable to put into words what they are feeling and end up using physical pain as an attempt to alleviate sadness, anger, anxiety, emptiness, or suffering.

Including...

- Cutting
- Intentional burns
- Scratches
- Hitting oneself
- Piercing one's own skin
- Putting oneself in risky situations

Self-harm does not necessarily mean that the person **wants to die**.

However, it indicates significant emotional distress, and when **left without care** and support, it becomes a major risk factor for suicide.



# Why does it happen?

Some studies suggest that it occurs primarily as:

## **Emotional regulation:**

It reduces intense emotions (anxiety, anger, guilt, sadness)

Lucas spent the day trying to pretend everything was fine, but inside he felt anger, sadness, and anxiety all at once. When his emotions reached their limit, he ended up hurting himself because he felt it was the only way to ease that pain for a few minutes.

## **Relief from a feeling of emptiness**

Even surrounded by people, Lucas felt a huge emptiness, as if he were disconnected from the world and from himself. Sometimes, physical pain seemed to be the only thing that made him “feel something.”

## **Self-punishment**

After failing a test and hearing criticism at home, Lucas began to think he never did anything right. He blamed himself so much that he came to believe he deserved to suffer.

## **Communicating suffering**

(in some cases)

Lucas wanted to ask for help, but he couldn't put into words how bad he felt. Not knowing how to talk about his own pain, he ended up expressing it through self-harm.

# What do studies show?

**13,2% of Brazilian adults reported self-harm**



This means that, for every 10 people, at least 1 has intentionally harmed themselves at some point in their life to try to cope with emotional distress.

## **Higher prevalence among young people**

Adolescents and young adults are the ones who most frequently report self-harm, especially during periods of significant change, pressure, and emotional difficulties.

## **Significant association with moderate and severe anxiety symptoms**

Many people who self-harm also report feeling constant worry, fear, racing thoughts, and difficulty relaxing, as if their minds could never rest.

## **Significant association with moderate and severe symptoms of depression**

Feelings of discouragement, emptiness, emotional exhaustion, and a loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed also frequently appear in people who engage in self-harm.



# The following were also identified:

## Impact of social isolation

Spending a lot of time alone, away from friends, family, or school, can increase feelings of loneliness and emotional distress.



## Financial difficulties

Money problems, unemployment, or constant worry about bills can cause a great deal of stress and a sense of insecurity.

## Family losses

The loss of someone important or conflicts within the family can intensify feelings of sadness, abandonment, and emotional pain.



## Difficulty accessing mental health treatment

Many people want help but find it difficult to get psychological care, whether due to lack of access, money, or support. If you don't know where to seek help, visit page **16**

# Risk Factors

- ! Age (18–34 years with the highest prevalence);
- ! History of depression.;
- ! High levels of anxiety symptoms;
- ! Impulsivity;
- ! Isolation;
- ! Financial instability ;
- ! Fear/uncertainty ;
- ! Family conflicts.



# Warning Signs

Constantly wearing long clothing to hide marks; ⚠️

Frequent injuries; ⚠️

Sudden mood swings; ⚠️

Isolation; ⚠️

Feelings of worthlessness or emptiness. ⚠️



# How can I help?

## Listen without Judgment

- Ex: "I'm here to listen"
- "You can vent to me; I'm here to help you"
- "You can trust me; I won't judge or condemn you"
- "Don't worry... Go ahead and talk; I'll be here. I just want to listen and find a way for us to work this out"

## Ask directly, but gently

- Ex: "You don't have to go through this alone, okay?"
- "Is there anyone you feel safe talking to?"
- "What usually helps you feel a little better?"
- "If you'd like, tell me a little about what's been happening."

## Show interest in the conversation

- Ex: "Is there anything I can do for you right now?"
- "How can I help you right now?"
- "Can I stay with you for a little while?"
- "How about you give me a call or let me know when you're ready to do that? I can listen to you, and we'll find a solution."



**Validating emotions  
reduces risk.**

## Encourage Them to Seek Professional Help

- Ex: “Have you thought about talking to a professional who can help you understand and ease this pain?”
- “Have you ever thought about seeking professional help?”
- “How about we make arrangements to get some professional help for you?”

## Avoid Phrases Like:

### Minimizing

EX: “That’s just being dramatic”; “It’s a lack of faith”; “You’re just doing that to get attention”; “You’re too weak.”

### Punishing

Ex: “If you keep this up, no one will want to be around you.” “If you do that again, you’ll be grounded.” “If you don’t stop now, I’ll take everything away from you.”

### Threaten

Ex: “Look what you’re doing to your family.” “If you keep this up, no one will want to be around you.” “If you keep this up, you’ll end up in a mental hospital.”

### You are not weak.

Self-harm is an attempt to cope with something that hurts too much, but there are healthier, safer ways to help you face that pain—ways that won’t lead to those consequences.

**Seeking help is an act of courage.**

# Alternative Strategies



## Hold ICE

It may seem strange, but know that **ice can help because it provides a sense of relief** in the body without causing injury. This can reduce the urge to hurt yourself during moments of crisis. It's worth remembering that this isn't a permanent solution, as the important thing is to seek professional help.

Ex: When Lucas felt intense anxiety and the urge to self-harm, he would hold an ice cube in his hand for a few seconds. The cold sensation helped him focus on the present until the urge subsided a little

## Write Down How You Feel



You can also try writing something down, **as writing can help release emotions that are trapped inside your head.** Often, when we put our thoughts on paper, we can better understand what we're feeling.

Ex: Lucas started writing down in a notebook everything he felt when he was sad or angry. This helped him realize that there were many things hurting him inside beyond that specific moment.



## Taking a Cold Shower

Another thing is that **cold water can help the body “wake up”** and reduce the intensity of very strong emotions, such as anger, anxiety, or despair.



Ex: After an argument at home, Lucas realized he was very upset and thinking about hurting himself. Instead, he took a cold shower to try to calm down and organize his thoughts.



## Exercise

You can also do some physical exercise, **try to move your body**, as this can help relieve tension, anxiety, and pent-up emotions. Exercise can bring a sense of relief and well-being after some time.

Ex: On days when he was feeling very distressed, Lucas started riding his bike and going for walks while listening to music. This helped him release some of the tension he was feeling.

## Talk to people you trust

You can try talking to someone, because **talking about your pain can lessen the feeling of being alone**. Having someone who listens without judging helps ease the emotional burden.

Ex: When the urge to self-harm arose, Lucas would text a trusted friend or talk to his sister. Even without solving everything, feeling that someone cared made a difference.



# Where to seek help?

## **UBS - Basic Health Unit**

This is the entry point 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 assist people experiencing emotional distress. This service helps prevent suicide and can be reached by dialing 188, offering support to 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 care to people seeking therapy. The services are affordable or free at some universities.



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