

What to Do

When a Teen Self-Injures on a Trip



TREEHOUSE



OVERVIEW

Mission trips provide adventure and an opportunity to get a break from life's normal routines and scenery. While many students welcome this change and can easily leave behind things that might distract or burden them from fully embracing the trip, others can't help but carry those things with them. Students who struggle with mental health inevitably bring those struggles along, adding an element of unpredictability to their experience. Some of these students might engage in self-harm as a coping mechanism to manage stress, anxiety or overwhelming emotions.

What does this mean for youth leaders on a mission trip? This guidebook is designed to answer that question by drawing from the expertise of TreeHouse, one of our strategic partners and an incredible resource for youth workers across the U.S.

This guidebook is structured around a case study. In the first chapter, we introduce you to Maddie and describe her participation in self-harm during a mission trip. The story includes her specific behaviors, the response from her peers and the efforts leaders made to address the situation. Maddie's experience will serve as our guide as we explore the following:

- Recognizing the warning signs of self-injury
- Understanding the underlying issues
- Managing students, leaders, and the community when self-harming behavior is discovered
- Practicing post-trip follow-up to ensure everyone grows from the experience

Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of this resource.

- ▶ **Find a study partner.** The content in this guidebook is difficult to digest and it might take a while to understand how to best incorporate what you learn into your ministry setting. Invite someone along for the journey so you can process and learn together.
- ▶ **Take notes.** Even if you have some familiarity with self-injury, it is a good idea to document your thoughts and questions. This will provide another way of processing the information and also make it easier to handle situations that arise on the trip. Bring your notes along so you are not relying on memory when something comes up mid-week.
- ▶ **Ask for help.** The crew at TreeHouse did a great job putting this information together, but you may still have questions about what incidents of self-injury could mean for you and your team. That is perfectly understandable! Don't let it stop you from feeling prepared and empowered to serve the students on your trip. Reach out for help so you can feel more confident in your understanding.

Thank you for taking the mental health needs of your students seriously by engaging this material. We hope you find it to be helpful, encouraging and practical as you do the amazing work of student ministry.

- CHAPTER 1 -

Recognizing Self-Injurious Behavior

MEET MADDIE:

Maddie stood in the warm shower, took her razor and began to cut through her skin, slowly at first, and then more boldly, deeper and deliberate.

As she watched the blood ooze through the fresh wounds she felt physical pain and, simultaneously, a warm euphoric feeling. Maddie watched the water wash the blood down her forearm, off her fingers and onto the shower floor. When she was about done, she checked the tile for any traces of blood, just as she does in her bathroom at home.

Maddie dressed in her shower stall. Her self-injury might have gone unnoticed if Emma hadn't looked at just the right moment, as they got ready in front of the bathroom mirrors. As Maddie reached for her hairbrush her loose sleeve revealed fresh cuts.

Emma almost freaked out right then, but she waited until they were done in the bathroom before excusing herself to find team leaders. Breathless, Emma recounted what she saw on Maddie's arm.

"I think Maddie tried to kill herself! You've got to do something... Now!"

Recognizing the severity of the situation, yet not wanting to alarm Maddie or cause unnecessary drama, the leader closest to her and the main trip leader casually approached Maddie with a warm smile at breakfast and asked her to stop by their table before she left the building.

She didn't. They weren't surprised.

After searching much of the facility, they found her in a remote bathroom stall.

Quietly, the leader closest to Maddie spoke up: "Hey Maddie, we missed catching up with you at breakfast. We should talk. I'll be sitting right outside when you're ready." Fifteen minutes later Maddie sheepishly walked out of the bathroom. It was already a hot summer day, and she was wearing a long, baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants.

What stands out to you from Maddie's story of self-injury?

What might be the top priorities and considerations of trip leaders?

The next section introduces the causes and functions of self-injury and outlines some warning signs to be aware of as you lead your mission trip team.

RECOGNIZING SELF-INJURY

Self-injury is a strategy people use to manage the weight of overwhelming emotions. Negative emotions related to poor self-image, rejection, loneliness, betrayal or confusion over identity and belonging can be too much for teenagers to deal with, leading some to look for ways to escape the stress, even temporarily.

Shame and fear of exposure both contribute to the deliberate secrecy most self-injurers practice. Often friends and family have no idea that their loved one chooses to self-injure.

Cutting is the most common form of self-injury, but many people who practice self-injury use other methods:

- Scratching
- Pinching
- Punching hard objects (like walls)
- Hitting oneself (with a fist, a pencil or school book)
- Burning (with fire or rubbing burns with a pencil eraser)
- Head-banging (against a wall) or hair-pulling
- Tearing open skin, scabs, or scars

WARNING SIGNS

The following are common indicators that someone might be involved in self-injury:

Strong physical indicators:

- Even incidental contact is responded to forcefully
- Wearing long, baggy clothing even during the summer months
- Unusual desire for privacy when changing clothes

Strong emotional indicators:

- Self-injurious teens often seem aloof and unapproachable
- Answers to questions—especially personal questions—are guarded and seemingly emotionless
- Teens who had been vibrant and engaging now seem distant and disengaged

Strong self-loathing comments:

- Self-identifies as unlovable
- Consistently expressing body-shaming attitudes
- Unusually self-critical

- CHAPTER 2 -

Underlying Issues

WHY MADDIE CUT

Maddie thought that she could not get through another day of the trip without cutting. She could not silence the voices shouting negative messages all day long.

You're fat.

You're ugly.

You never do anything right.

Everyone wishes that you stayed home.

Nothing Maddie tried to tell herself worked to stop these messages from running through her mind and making her feel terrible about herself. She began to panic, longing for a way to find relief from her emotional pain.

The cutting helped, but Maddie's relief was brief. Even as she put pressure on her wounds to stop the bleeding, she began to feel guilty. Maddie believed that if she was stronger, smarter and more resilient she wouldn't have to cut. She thought if she was only more religious, more faithful to God, more prayerful, and more trusting of God, she wouldn't have to injure herself to feel safe and at peace.

UNDERSTANDING THE UNDERLYING ISSUES.

When we face a situation where a teen chooses to self-injure, there are many things to consider. We have to manage the crisis to keep the student safe and the trip on track. In the moment, this should be our first priority. Yet we also recognize that there are underlying issues feeding into that teen's self-injury, issues that likely took a lifetime to develop and will not be fixed overnight. It is helpful to note that *cutting is a coping method to live. It is not typically a precursor to suicide.*

When considering potential causes for self-injurious behavior in teens, it is important to recognize some common assumptions that are unhelpful and often misguided if not kept in check.

They just do this for attention.

Some people do injure themselves for attention, but most do not. And even for attention-seekers, consider the turmoil and loneliness that that one must be experiencing to go to such extreme lengths to gain positive attention; they need our grace.

They would be fine if they could just be tougher or more faith-filled.

As you approach teens, try to withhold judgment. Labeling teens as weak, vulnerable or needy is not going to be helpful to you or them.

It's because of...

Avoid assigning blame or problem-solving beyond the scope of the trip. Working through the layers of lies, pain and strong emotions is complex. It is not helpful if we jump in and try to fix things we don't understand.

Identifying false or unhelpful assumptions and choosing to set aside any instinct to immediately minimize, blame or fix anything is an important step in walking alongside a self-injurious teen.

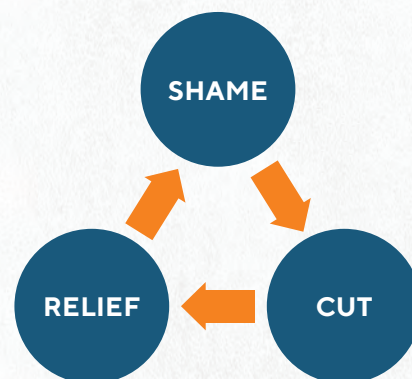
Recognizing that self-injury is a symptom of a deeper-rooted issue provides a context for what the teen is experiencing; often the deep issues leading to self-injury are related to an inability to manage big or difficult emotions.

Emotions are a gift from God and help us communicate our experience and perspective. For many people—especially teens—our emotions can become our reality. We can allow them to inform our beliefs about what is true instead of centering God's truth as our compass. How we feel becomes our final authority. The challenge with allowing our emotions to determine what is true is that they are not trustworthy and change continuously. This is most true of teenagers, as they are experiencing massive brain development and hormone fluctuations.

Those who choose to self-injure could fill volumes with all of the reasons why they choose to cope through self-injury, but whatever the cause, at the core is an inability to handle unresolved, emotional pain.

People who self-injure often believe their actions...

- Allow them to express feelings they cannot express
- Allow them to have control over an aspect of their lives
- Keep them from feeling hopeless, helpless or numb
- Help block out difficult feelings and bad memories
- Release the emotional pain that is bottled up inside
- Are a logical solution to a problem



Self-injury contributes to a harmful, repeating cycle of shame, self-injury & relief.

Shame is often an integral component of the self-injury cycle, which is why it is vital for us to keep judgment and condemnation out of our thoughts and voice as we help these teens. If we show up with overly-simple solutions or rote Bible verse recitations, we could be contributing to their cycle instead of helping them find true freedom in Christ.

A GRACE-BASED APPROACH

Many teens do not understand their identity. They don't understand the depths of God's love for them and their unconditional acceptance in the family of God.

When people focus on their shame it is hard for them to believe that God is fully dedicated and 100% capable to care for them, including the weight of their emotions (1 Peter 5:7, Philippians 4:6-7). God is trustworthy. As they embrace that truth they will find that God is willing and able to listen, love, understand and empathize any time, 24/7/365.

Our opportunity as leaders, guides and mentors is to reinforce truth about their identity in Christ and the possibility of freedom from destructive thoughts and behaviors. We can never overstate their worth in God's eyes and the commitment God has to care for them, redeem them and meet their needs.

It is with this approach that we can address teens in the middle of a crisis and continue caring for them after returning home. We can remind them that God loves them and we can be the agents of God's love in the moment. We can help them feel heard and valued.

Coming up against feelings that seem too heavy to carry can be an awful experience for a teen on a trip. However, in that moment of raw emotions, it's a great time for us to introduce (or reintroduce) them to a God who loves them right where they're at, self-injury and all.

What was most helpful from this section about understanding underlying issues behind self-injury?

What are some possible ways to help students anticipate big, overwhelming emotions and situations on a mission trip?

- CHAPTER 3 -

Managing the Crisis Now and Later

WHAT MADDIE NEEDS AND WHAT THE GROUP NEEDS

When self-injury shows up on a mission trip, there are multiple things to consider, beginning with immediate responses and including longer-term follow up once the trip is over and the group is home. This chapter includes ideas for addressing the needs of the self-injurious student as well as others on the team.

Before you can dig into the grace-based approach with teens, you will have to manage the crisis at hand.

Pray

When helping a student who is experiencing self-injury, the first step is always to take time to pray. The Holy Spirit already knows what the student is going through and the best way to proceed. Lean on God ask for wisdom before you proceed with the student.

Separate

It is usually helpful to get the student away from the group to talk, as they may be embarrassed by what they're going through. At times, they may want to bring a close friend or someone they feel comfortable with for support.

Listen

When you sense the teen is ready to talk, ask some open-ended questions to help them verbalize what they are feeling, such as:

- It seems like you're having a hard time; can you help me understand what's going on?
- What three emotions are you feeling?
- When you feel those feelings, what positive things help you?
- In what way does your self-injury help you?

These questions will help give you some direction for your plan. Be patient - take time to let the student process their feelings and tell you what they need.

Plan

Work with the student and your staff members to identify what the teen needs. Their needs could be simple, such as having an adult check in with them periodically so that they can talk through their feelings. Or something more drastic might be helpful, such as having an augmented schedule to avoid triggers or even leaving the trip early.

Pro-Tip

After spending time listening and planning with the student, remind them that weapons aren't allowed on the trip, and ask them to turn over any implements of self-injury.

As part of your plan, be sure to check the legal reporting requirements both with local government officials and the pastoral leadership of your church. This is critical, and necessary to make sure everyone involved is fully aware of what must be communicated and to whom.

GROWING THE GROUP

As you plan, you should be thinking from three perspectives:

- What will lead to this student's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will lead to the group's growth while keeping them safe?
- What will help my adult leaders to grow in their leadership?

When a student has chosen to self-injure, it can be easy to put all your energy into helping the one student. However, if we only focus on the student, we miss an opportunity to help our staff and students mature.

HELPING LEADERS BE SUCCESSFUL

Every leader you brought on the trip is coming with their own perspectives, beliefs, and feelings. As the teen's self-injury behavior becomes evident, leaders will all respond differently. Some might become pouty, frustrated that the trip isn't living up to their expectations. Others might become heavy handed, wanting to take over and deal with the situation unilaterally. Others may have personal experience with self-injury and begin to overlay their experience onto the teen's experience.

It can be easy to lose focus on how leaders are doing emotionally and spiritually. As the primary leader of a trip, it is important to establish regular "check-in" meetings so that other leaders have the opportunity to vent and process how the trip is going from their perspective.

In these meetings, evaluate the following:

- How are leaders doing spiritually?
- How are leaders feeling emotionally?
- Take time to pray together.

Empathize with your leaders as it is always hard to see youth struggle. Give them time and space to express their thoughts and feelings. Don't be surprised if leaders are frustrated or annoyed with the teen; these are normal feelings when dealing with a difficult teen/situation.

TEAM UNITY

Intentionally creating a sense of unity can be one of the biggest ways to support leaders during a crisis situation. Make sure they know they are not alone and that the team is work through this together.

The unified approach starts at the top. People will be watching how the leader of the trip behaves. Make sure they know that you have theirs and the teens' best interests at heart, and that you remain steadfast in your support.

COLLECTIVE ACTION PLAN

Create a plan for how to best support the adult leader directly involved with the teen. Ask how you can best support them as they support the youth who made the decision to self-injure.

In many cases, there will be one adult leader who serves as the point person for the crisis. They are likely the one closest to the struggling teen and probably heard about the problem first. It is vital to give this person extra support and, whenever possible, empower this person to manage the crisis. Allow them to take the lead on decisions and issues that arise. Crisis situations are some of the best learning opportunities we can give to our leaders. If they know that we are walking alongside them and empowering them to make helpful decisions for the teen, they will walk away with more knowledge than they could ever obtain elsewhere. They will likely make some mistakes along the way—that's ok! Mistakes are the building blocks of growth.

Above all, recognize leaders' hard work and dedication to supporting the group. Encourage them and appreciate their willingness to sit in the hard stuff with the teen.

Remember that you are all in this together and that with the right plan, you can work together to make a huge impact in the teen's life.

GROUP DYNAMICS

One student's crisis can quickly lead to large group chaos. Gossip, jealousy, anger and frustration can quickly become toxic.

There are a few steps you can take to reel the group in and set them up for success:

- **Call out offenders quietly.**
If a student or group of students are causing tension and discord, pull them aside. Call them out and cast a vision for them to become encouragers rather than disruptors.
- **Have a group meeting.**
With the permission of the student who self-injured, it might be necessary to bring the group together and address the issues you're seeing. This meeting should not be about the struggling student, but rather about the behavior of the group. Using encouraging language, try to help everyone focus on supporting one another and building community.
- **Have students pray.**
It is hard to hold a grudge against someone when you are praying for them. If you sense the other students are feeling negatively toward the struggling student, pull them aside to pray for their teammate.

CONCLUSION

Post Trip Follow-Up

You made it! The trip is over, you've caught up on sleep (in your own bed), and returned to a regular eating schedule.

But the trip isn't really over. The issues that arise on a mission trip tend to carry over into the rest of life—and that's a good thing! When self-injury happens up on a trip, we learn something about everyone involved. We learn how they react to stressful situations, things they believe, and how they treat others. These are the things we want to carry back home and continue to recognize.

DEBRIEF WITH STAKEHOLDERS

Anticipate the possibility that several people and groups might need post-trip follow-up. This includes your teen(s) in crisis, their parents, your adult leaders, your other teen participants and their parents, and your supervisors.

In all conversations, make sure to:

- Listen attentively to their concerns.
- Respect their thoughts and feelings.
- Affirm your commitment to the safety and support of all participants.

Here are some debriefing guides for various groups:

Debriefing Yourself

- What was I feeling in the situation? What about now?
- How did I handle the crisis?
- What did I do really well?
- Was I seeking to simply control or to help the group to grow?
- What can I be thankful for about what happened?
- What would I handle differently next time?
- Recognize God's grace, love, and compassion toward you and others. Don't beat yourself up for mistakes made.

Debriefing With Your Adult Leaders

- From your perspective, what happened?
- Upon reflection, how are you feeling about what happened?
- Who were you proud of during the crisis?
- What did we do right as a leadership team?
- What could we have done better as a leadership team?
- Are there any measures we should consider for the next trip to prevent a crisis like this again?
- Pray together.

Debriefing With the Teens (*assuming the crisis spread beyond the individual teen involved in self-injury*)

- What was a highlight for you from the trip?
- What was a lowlight for you from the trip?
- What did you learn because of the situation we experienced?
- Who were you proud of during the trip?
- As a group, how well did we show love?
- Is there anyone you need to apologize to for your actions or attitude?
- Are there any measures we should consider for the next trip to prevent a crisis like this again?
- Pray together.

Debriefing with Parents

- What have you heard about the trip and what are your concerns?
- Explain the situation factually and unemotionally.
- Explain the measures you and your staff took to handle the situation.
- Take responsibility for mistakes you or your staff made (without assigning blame).
- Affirm your care for their teens and your commitment to their safety and growth.

CONTINUING THE GRACE-BASED APPROACH AT HOME

Ultimately, we want to see teens at peace, resting in the love of their savior and a group of caring people. We want them to believe they don't need to fear their feelings because God loves that teen and gave emotions as a gift. We want them to believe the never-changing God instead of their ever-changing emotions.

When we can help teens get to a place where they truly believe in the reality of God's love for them, they will begin to find freedom.

In Maddie's experience, although well-meaning, platitudes like, "Just trust God!" and "Pray about it" add guilt and shame to the weight she already carries. Unfortunately, this misguided approach has been prevalent in churches and caused a lot of people to shy away from God rather than embrace seek help or embrace the work of the Spirit.

We play a vital role in guiding teens and their families toward wholeness and a deeper relationship with Christ. A thorough assessment by a qualified mental health professional is also needed; a competent therapist can help the teen and their family navigate the challenges exposed by the self-injuring behavior.

THE TEEN

If the teen is willing to consider other ways of coping with their strong emotions, here are some steps to help the teen take over time:

- Become thankful for all feelings, even uncomfortable ones
- Identify triggers that lead to self-injury episodes

- Embrace the fact that the self-injury solution isn't their best option for managing strong emotions
- Break the shame cycle by embracing a redeemed identity in Christ
- Become accountable to a trusted adult
- Meditate on scripture centered on freedom, forgiveness and God's love
- Find alternative emotional outlets (talking about your feelings with empathetic friends, journaling, coloring, art and exercise)

PARENTS/GUARDIANS

We feel sad and concerned when we learn that teens are hurting themselves. We know that we need to take action and we know that we need to do this carefully. We need to inform and involve the parents/guardians about the problem but our response needs to be wise and considerate.

Pro-Tip

Never promise a student that you will keep their secret. Instead, promise that if you must tell someone, you will do so with their knowledge.

Each teen's life and family situation are unique, so consideration of potential reaction from parents is a factor in our approach. There is the possibility that informing the parents could initially create more severe problems, especially if the teen comes from a dysfunctional home with ongoing relationship stress with parents.

Many parents see cutting and self-injury as a life-threatening problem, and react as such. Their reactions of fear, shock, and anger, can drive the teen deeper into self-protection and self-reliance.

Help parents...

- Provide unconditional love and support without judgment
- Focus on underlying problems, rather than the self-injury
- Support alternative coping strategies for their teen
- Accept that what the teens is experiencing is real and that self-injury is helping them solve a problem
- Celebrate their teen's successes

Although self-injury might create a crisis, with care, support, and wise counsel it might become a unique opportunity to build community and help families deepen their understanding of true freedom in Christ.

Helping a student, their peers, their parents and adult leaders through an experience of self-injury is trying and difficult. Thank you for caring so deeply about your ministry that you took time to learn and develop skills in managing this kind of crisis. We are grateful to be on this journey with you!



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