

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when you hurt yourself on purpose. Examples of self-harm include cutting, burning, poisoning and bruising. Other forms of more indirect self-harm may be self-neglect or excessive risk taking behaviour.

**Self-harming behaviour is relatively common - at least 10% of adolescent's report having self-harmed - and it can affect anyone of any age, background or race. But it's a problem that needs to be taken seriously.**



Self-harm is not a positive way to deal with difficult feelings and experiences, and over time it can become a habit that is hard to stop. That's why it's so important to spot it as soon as possible and do everything you can to help.



## Why does someone self-harm?

Self-harm is a very different experience for each individual, and is usually a way of coping with difficult feelings and experiences. It can be a way for someone to feel more in control, to reduce tension, to release powerful emotions, or to punish themselves. Self-harm can develop as a coping mechanism as a result of;

- anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, poor body image, gender identity, sexuality, abuse
- friendship or school problems, bullying, social media pressure, peer pressure, rejection
- family problems such as separation or conflict, unrealistic expectations and bereavement.



 **If you are worried that someone you care for may be self-harming - start the conversation.**

**Be honest and open with them and explain why you are concerned - re-assure them that you are there to listen, that you love them, and that will not change.**

**If they are unwilling to talk to you now, give them space and re-assure them you are there to listen and that there are people who are there to help.**

## Deep breath, don't panic!

Finding out that someone you care for is self-harming can leave you feeling a range of strong emotions such as confusion, anger, shock, guilt, worry and so on.

**It's challenging, but try not to over-react.**

The main reason that people find it hard to talk about their self-

harming is fear of others reaction and being misunderstood.

**Try to hold on to the idea that their self-harm behaviour is an expression of strong feelings and experiences that right now they can't handle any other way.**

Acknowledge to them that opening up about

their self-harming behaviour was a very brave thing to do and that you are grateful that they have told you.

**Re-assure them there is help and support out there. They are not alone, and neither are you.**



## How do I know someone is self-harming?

Worried someone you care for might be self-harming? Keep an eye open for these signs:

- unexplained cuts, burns, bite-marks, bruises or bald patches
- bloody tissues, bandages or wipes in waste bins

- keeping their body covered
- becoming withdrawn or isolated
- low mood, lack of interest in life or depression
- blaming themselves for problems
- feelings failure, useless, or hopeless

## Understanding the cycle of self-harm

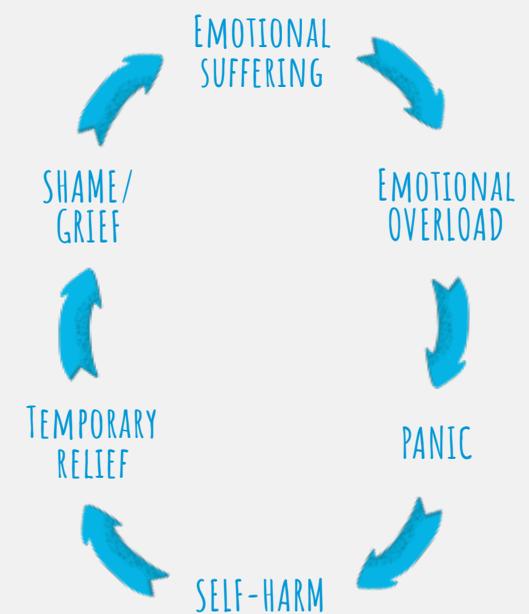
Self-harm is a way to find temporary relief from emotional overload. Breaking the cycle and helping someone to find other ways they might manage these feelings is really important.

This can include distraction or stress management techniques, and thinking of alternative methods of discharging extreme emotions. Some people find that putting off harming themselves can decrease or get rid of the urge. Reducing the accessibility of objects that might be used for self-harm may also help to delay the impulse to self-harm.

**The urge to self-harm is strongest for 15 minutes. Finding a way to distract yourself during this time can make all the difference.**

There are some excellent Apps to help people manage the urges to self-harm such as **Calm Halm** and **DistrACT**.

Alongside learning coping strategies to distract from the need to self-harm it can really



help to explore the issues behind the self-harming behaviour. For some people these may be obvious and resolvable, but for many others less so.

**Many people stop self-harming when the time is right for them. It's a way of coping right now, and doing it now does NOT mean that they will have to do it forever.**



## Supporting someone who is self-harming

Friends and family can play a huge role in supporting someone who self-harms. You can help by:

- Offer a listening ear and showing you care when someone is struggling.
- Remind the person of their strengths and abilities
- Look online together at coping strategies and ways they can manage self-harm urges. Remember what works for some may not work for others. Encourage them to try different strategies until they find one that works.
- Explore what support and services are available and offer to go with them to appointments
- Agree with them about access to self-harm methods.
- Make sure first aid materials are available and encourage them to get medical attention when needed
- Watch for signs of bullying, abuse or other difficult situations that may be triggering self-harm
- Don't treat them any differently from normal in other areas of their life

Remember, you don't need to understand why they self-harm, and you don't need to fix things. Listening and showing you care can be really powerful in itself, alongside working together to find the coping strategies and support they need.



## Looking after yourself

If you are supporting someone who self-harms, you can experience strong emotions and it is important that you look after yourself as well. Recovery from self-harm may be a long process.

- Try to find time for relaxation and "me time" and keep on doing the things you enjoy.
- Look after your sleep patterns, eat well and try to exercise.
- Be aware of your own feelings in response to the self-harming of the person you care for. Try not to let them spill out as anger at the person.
- It can really help to find someone to talk to, and to share your concerns, frustration and hopes.
- Make use of support groups, helplines and online information and forums.



## Getting professional help

If you are really concerned about someone you should seek further help, particularly if

- the self-harm or distress is increasing in frequency or intensity
- you notice additional problems such as anxiety, low mood or thoughts of suicide

Sources of help include;

- Their GP is the first person to contact. They can refer a child or young person to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for an assessment. This may result in a plan for support and treatment. Adults may be referred to one of the local Mental Health services.
- If a child or young person goes to hospital for any reason related to self-harm, they should be seen by someone who can talk to them about their self-harm. They may also arrange a mental health assessment. If it is not clear whether this has happened, ask the staff and clarify what is offered.
- There are specialist charities or counselling providers in your area who support people who self-harm. There are a range of telephone helplines and online support forums which can also provide support.

**Self-harm**  
Information for  
Parents and Carers



## Thoughts of suicide

The majority of people use self-harm as a way of dealing with difficulties in their life, not as a way of wanting to end their own life - but having a history of self-harm is one of the highest risk factors for suicide. Over 50% of people who die by suicide have a history of self-harm.

If you are at all worried that someone you care for is having thoughts of suicide ask them, and ask them directly. You will not put ideas in their head, research shows this. It also shows that talking directly about suicide significantly reduces the risks of it happening.



## Information and support for Parents and Carers

- **Young Minds Parents Helpline**  
www.youngminds.org.uk  
08080 802 5544  
Open Monday to Friday 9.30-4.00pm

Available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25.

- **Self-harm UK** <https://www.selfharm.co.uk/>
- **Mind** [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)
- **Papyrus** [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

Visit [www.every-life-matters.org.uk/get-help](http://www.every-life-matters.org.uk/get-help) for more information about resources, support and services.

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Suicide Safer Cumbria  
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Charity No.1180815