

Self-Harm Toolkit


A resource to help support a child or young person who is engaging in self-harming behaviours

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What is Self-Harm?

Self-harming is also sometimes referred to as self-injury, deliberate self-harm, self-mutilation or intentional self-harm.

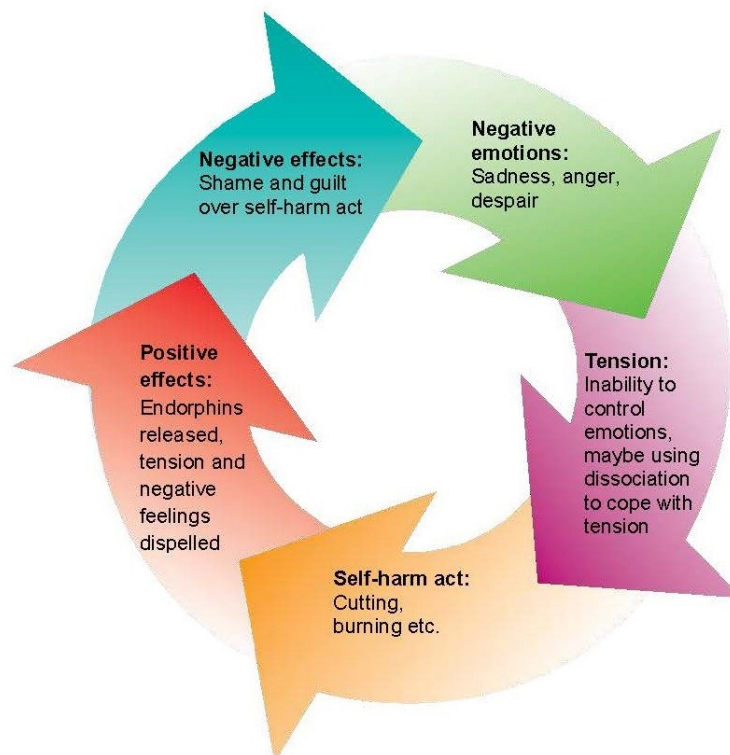
Self-harm is often a physical response to an emotional pain of some kind, and can be very addictive. Some of the things people do are quite well known, such as cutting, burning or pinching, but there are many ways to hurt yourself, including abusing drugs and alcohol or having an eating disorder. Sometimes, it can be more helpful to focus on how someone is feeling, rather than what they do to themselves, to try and help them.

Self-harm often happens during times of anger, distress, fear, worry, depression or low self-esteem in order to manage or control negative feelings. Self-harm can also be used as a form of punishment for something someone has done, thinks they have done, are told by someone else that they have done, or that they have allowed to be done to themselves.

Anything that causes harm – even slight harm – which in some small way makes you feel better emotionally or numbs the feelings of pain, can fall under the umbrella of self-harm.

The Self-harm cycle

Self harm usually starts as a way to relieve the build up of pressure from distressing thoughts and feelings. Whilst the self-harming behaviour might give temporary relief from the emotional pain the person is feeling, it's important to know that this relief is only temporary because the underlying reasons still remain. Soon after, feelings of guilt and shame might follow, which can continue the cycle.



Because relief from self-harm gives only temporary relief, it can become someone's normal way of dealing with life's difficulties. This means it is important to talk to someone as early as possible to get the right support and help. Learning other coping strategies to deal with these difficulties can make it easier to break the cycle of self-harm in the long term.

Why do people self-harm?

Reasons to self-harm can be very different from person to person. Some of the reasons that young people report as triggers or reasons that lead them to self harm include:

- Difficulties at home
- Arguments or problems with friends
- School pressures
- Bullying
- Depression
- Poor mental health
- Anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Transitions or changes, such as moving schools
- Alcohol and drug use

When some of these reasons come together, they can quickly feel overwhelming. Often young people hurt themselves because they don't know what else to do and want a 'release' or 'escape'.

Self Harming behaviours

Even if the initial intent is not to kill oneself, self-harming may express a powerful sense of despair and needs to be taken seriously. Some people who do not intend to kill themselves may do so because they do not realise the seriousness of the method they have chosen or because they do not get help in time following an incident. Examples of self-harming behaviour include:

- Cutting (using a blade / sharp object to make cuts in their skin)
- Taking an overdose of tablets
- Swallowing hazardous materials or substances
- Burning, either physically or chemically
- Over/under medicating, e.g. misuse of insulin
- Punching/hitting/bruising
- Hair-pulling/skin-picking/head-banging
- Episodes of alcohol/drug abuse or over/ under-eating
- Risky taking behaviour including overtly sexualized behaviours
- Carving, scratching words or symbols on the skin
- Piercing the skin with sharp objects
- Inserting objects under the skin
- Hanging
- Suffocation

Most frequently, the arms, legs and front of the torso are the targets of self-injury, but it could be any area of the body. People who self-injure may use more than one method to harm themselves.

Becoming upset can trigger an urge to self-injure. Many people self-injure only a few times and then stop. But for others, self-injury can become a long-term, repetitive behaviour.

Signs of Self-harm

It can be hard to recognise the signs of self-harm in children and teenagers, but it's important to trust your instincts if you're worried something's wrong.

Signs to look out for can include:

- covering up, for example by wearing long sleeves a lot of the time, especially in summer
- unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or bite-marks on their body
- blood stains on clothing, or finding tissues with blood on them
- becoming withdrawn and spending a lot of time alone
- avoiding friends and family
- feeling down, low self-esteem or blaming themselves for things
- outbursts of anger, or risky behaviour like drinking or taking drugs.

MYTH: 'Self-harm is attention-seeking'

This is not the case. Many people who self-harm don't talk to anyone about what they are going through for a long time and it can be very hard to find enough courage to ask for help.

MYTH: 'People who self-harm are suicidal'

For many people self-harms is about trying to cope with difficult feelings and circumstances. Some people have described it is a way of staying alive and surviving these difficulties. However, some people who self-harm can feel suicidal and might attempt to take their own life, which is why it must always be taken seriously.

MYTH: 'Only girls self-harm'

Boys and girls may engage with different self-harming behaviours or have different reasons for hurting themselves but this doesn't make it any less serious.

Supporting children and young people who self-harm

ASK: Although self-harm is often a hidden behaviour, the child or young person may give subtle signs that they want help. As a trusted adult, learn to be alert to these signs and respond to these invitations by being “helpfully nosey”. Here are some simple tips for conversations about self-harm:

- Take all self-harm seriously
- Treat the child or young person with respect and empathise: get across that you care, and that you want to understand and to help
- Take a non-judgemental approach: reassure that you understand that self-harm may be helping the child or young person to cope at the moment

AVOID: Do not react with strong or negative emotions: alarm or discomfort. Avoid asking abrupt or rapid questions. Do not making judgements or accusations. .

Do not put too much focus on the self-harm itself or tell the young person they need to stop.

LISTEN: Make yourself fully available if a child or young person seeks you out or responds to an invitation to talk further.

Listen carefully in a calm and compassionate way.

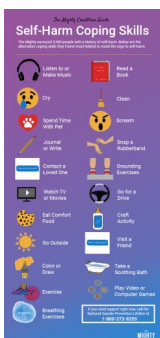
Have your eyes, ears and body language open to what the young person has to say, without judging, or being shocked.

Resources and techniques that you can share with young people

Distraction: The main way people help themselves when they want to self-harm is through distraction. See distraction ideas handout

Elastic band: Give the young person an **elastic band** and encourage them to wear it around their wrist and to ping it against their skin to distract from further self-injury.

Paper Chain Project: Give the young person a **paper chain project pack**. You can review this with them, it can help initiate conversations and highlight and patterns of thoughts and behaviours



Give a copy of **Self-harm coping skills sheet**

Give out a copy of the **Harmless, first step plan**. You could complete this with the young person and help them to identify a person they could talk with.

A form titled 'harmLESS - First Step plan'. It asks for the young person's name and date. It has sections for: 'If you were worried about yourself you could talk with' (Friend, Adult), 'If you are feeling down these might help you to ride out this feeling' (Distracting activities, Mood lifting activities, Physical activities, Social activities, Other activities), 'If you want more information these links might be helpful' (Information and advice about local support from 'on your mind', Information about mental health from youngminds.org.uk, Information about CAMHS from https://www.ucl.ac.uk/health-ips/camhs), and 'We will meet again to talk about how you are feeling on'. It also has a field for 'Helpers name' and 'Copy for Young person, Helper, Supporter'.

Suggest drawing on the area you would like to self-harm with a **red pen** to simulate self-harm. Give a red pen to take home if they want to try this technique or they could use **food colouring** or **body paint**.

Encourage **talking** about how they are feeling with someone they trust can feel like a relief. This person could be a friend, family member, teacher, school counsellor/nurse, or youth worker. Get them to explore who they feel safe with and how they would feel most comfortable communicating, whether it's face to face, over the phone, by text or email.

Distraction Ideas Handout

Different distractions work for different people, and the same distraction won't necessarily work for you every time. For example, distracting yourself from anger feels very different to distracting yourself from fear, so it's important that you have a few different strategies to choose from.

If you're feeling anger and frustration:

- exercise
- hit cushions
- shout and dance
- shake
- tear something up into hundreds of pieces
- go for a run.

If you're feeling sadness and fear:

- wrap a blanket around you
- spend time with an animal
- walk in nature
- let yourself cry or sleep
- listen to soothing music
- tell someone how you feel
- massage your hands
- lie in a comfortable position and breathe in – then breathe out slowly, making your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Repeat until you feel more relaxed.

If you're feeling a need to be more in control

- write lists
- tidy up
- declutter
- write a letter saying everything you are feeling, then tear it up
- weed a garden
- clench then relax all your muscles.

If you're feeling numb and disconnected

- flick elastic bands on your wrists
- hold ice cubes
- smell something with strong odour
- have a very cold shower.

If you're feeling self-hatred and wanting to punish yourself

- write a letter from the part of you that feels the self-hatred, then write back with as much compassion and acceptance as you can as if it was to someone else
- find creative ways to express the self-hatred, through writing songs or poetry, drawing, movement or singing, do physical exercise (like running or going to the gym) to express the anger that is turned in on yourself.

If you're feeling shame

- stop spending time with anyone who treats you unkindly
- recognise when you are trying to be perfect and accept that making mistakes is part of being human
- remind yourself that there are reasons for how you behave – it is not because you are 'bad'.

Self-harm – Sources of support

The following are sources of support that can be given to young people:

- Speak to the GP—they can refer to a specialist service like CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services)
- Mind.org.uk - Coping with self-harm for young people
- Youngminds.org.uk - Self-harm: a guide for young people
- YoungMinds Crisis Messenger – for young people under 19 **Text "YM" to 85258**
- themix.org.uk - Self Harm
- Kooth.com - Self Harm
- Childline 0800 1111