

## Self-harm: A guide for parents and carers

Self-harm is more common than many people realise, especially among younger people. It is a very common behaviour in young people. Approximately 1 in 4 teenagers report deliberately self-harming on at least one occasion in the past twelve months between the ages of 14-17 around one in 12 people, with 20% of 15 year olds reporting that they have deliberately self-harmed previously. Rates of known deliberate self-harm are estimated to be nearly three times higher for girls compared to boys, with higher rates of self-harm amongst people from the LGBTQI+ community<sup>10</sup> and young people with special educational and neurodevelopmental needs. These figures may vary as not everyone reports self-harming behaviours, and not everyone seeks help.

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm is behaviour that is done deliberately to harm oneself. At least 10% of adolescents report having self-harmed.

Self-harm can include, for example:

- self-cutting
- taking an overdose
- hitting or bruising
- intentionally taking too little or too much medication
- burning
- hanging
- suffocation

Although some people who self-harm may be suicidal, self-harm is often used as a way of managing difficult emotions without being a suicide attempt. However, self-harming can result in accidental death.

### Is your child self-harming?

As a parent, you might suspect your child is self-harming. If you are worried, watch out for these signs:

- Unexplained cuts, burns or bruises
- Keeping themselves covered; avoiding swimming or changing clothes around others
- Being withdrawn or isolated from friends and family
- Low mood, lack of interest in life or depression
- Blaming themselves for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness, hopelessness or anger

What makes a young person vulnerable to self-harm?

**Individual factors** such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, poor problem-solving, impulsivity, eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, bullying (because of race or sexuality)

**Family factors** such as mental health difficulties in the family, poor parental relationships, drug/alcohol misuse in the family, unreasonable expectations, conflict between young person and parents, excessive punishments or restrictions, family history of self-harm, abuse, neglect

**Social factors** such as difficulties in peer relationships, bullying, peer rejection, abuse, availability of methods of self-harm, friends who self-harm, media and internet influences.

## Reasons for self-harm

Self-harm can serve several different functions:

- to manage extreme emotional upset
- to reduce tension
- to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- a form of escape
- an effort to regain control over feelings or problems
- an attempt to punish themselves or others
- to elicit care from others
- to identify with a peer group
- self-harm can also be a suicide attempt
- Possible future problems

Repeated self-harm is common following a first episode

Depending on the method, self-harm can lead to serious physical damage, including permanent scarring, the medical effects of a dangerous overdose, etc.

Self-harm may be linked to other problems, such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders or drug and alcohol use, for which specific treatment may be required

Individuals who have self-harmed are at higher risk of suicide than other young people, although the risk is still low

For these reasons, it is important where possible to tackle self-harming behaviour early.

## Finding out about self-harm

Some children may tell their parents about their self-harm; other parents find out from friends, teachers or medical staff. Discovering that your child is self-harming can be very upsetting and stressful. Parents may experience a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, helplessness, shame or disgust. It is normal to feel strong emotions and important to try and understand and accept them so that you don't risk misdirecting them at your child. Try to think of their behaviour as an expression of deep emotions they can't handle any other way.

On the next page, we will explore strategies you can use to support a child or young person struggling with self-harm.

## Supporting your child

### If your child discloses self-harm to you:

You might feel shocked, angry, helpless, responsible or any number of other difficult emotions.

Try not to panic or overreact. The way you respond to your friend or family member will have an impact on how much they open up to you and other people about their self-harm in the future.

Remember that self-harm is usually someone's way of managing very hard feelings or experiences, and that in the majority of cases it is different to suicidal feelings.

Listen and empathise with what they're going through and remind them they can talk to you for as long or as often as they need to. Most importantly, let them know that you love them and that these feelings won't last forever.

Understandably, you might have lots of questions but remember that your child is going through a tough time, so focus on supporting them emotionally.

Some young people find it hard to open up about what they're feeling because they don't want to worry or upset those around them. So, if they don't want to talk to you, you could encourage them to speak to someone else, whether that's a friend, family member, a charity helpline, or a combination of these sources of support.

- Stay calm and focus on listening
- Try to understand their emotions and experiences without judging them or focusing on their self-harm.
- Remember they may struggle to answer 'why' questions in relation to self-harm.
- It might be tempting to try to 'fix' the situation straightaway, but it may take time.
- Sometimes your child may just want someone to listen to how they are feeling and remind them of their positive qualities.
- Help them to notice when the urge to self-harm started and what's causing it.
- It can help to think together about how they feel when they want to self-harm.
- What are they thinking about and how do they feel in their body. For example, do they feel stressed and panicky, or do they feel numb and zoned out? This can help them to better understand what feelings they're trying to deal with.
- Then ask them how they'd like to be supported and encourage them to seek help.

### Starting a conversation with your child about self-harm:

- Have a conversation, but don't bring up self-harm straight away
- You could organise this around another activity, like a walk or drive
- Ask if anything is worrying them and how they are feeling
- Let them know you are not judging them or putting them down, and that you love them and that will not change
- Show that you are prepared to listen to what your child has to say

- If your child does not want to talk, see if they will write you a note, email or text message about how they feel
- Ask if they would rather speak to someone else (such as a GP, counsellor or helpline)
- If your child is able to be open about their self-harm, try to help them work out feelings and situations that may trigger it
- Relate to them as a whole person, not just their self-harm.
- Try to think together of ways to handle strong feelings that don't involve self-harm
- Help them think through their problems and see possible solutions
- Encourage them to think about the long view and how things may change in the future
- Let them know that they can talk to you any time, for as long as they need.

## Other ways to help

- Take talk of suicide very seriously
- Don't let self-harm become the focus of your relationship with your child
- Try to deal with self-harm in a matter-of-fact manner
- Let your child know that their emotions are real and important
- Remind your child of their strengths and abilities
- Reassure them that you do not think they are a failure whatever their difficulties
- Explain to your child that you want to help but may not know the best thing to do, and try to come up with a solution together (such as visiting the GP)
- Work out with your child how to make it more difficult for them to self-harm (such as by storing medication securely or removing sharp objects)
- Watch for signs of bullying or abuse that may be triggering self-harm

## What doesn't help?

Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, attempts to support someone can backfire. Here are some potential pitfalls to watch out for:

- Trying to force change.
- Acting or communicating in a way that threatens to take control away from your child.
- Either ignoring their injuries or overly focusing on them.
- Labelling self-harm as 'attention seeking'.

Although it often isn't, self-harm can sometimes be a person's way of asking for attention. If so, it is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with wanting attention, and that deep distress can get in the way of a child or young person's ability to be direct about what they need.

Next, we will explore how to manage self-harm.

## Managing injuries from self-harm

If you are concerned about a wound (if it is too deep to manage at home) or other serious injuries you should seek emergency medical help through your local Accident and Emergency service

### Overdoses

- Get your child to an emergency department as soon as possible
- Try to find out what they have taken and tell emergency medical staff
- If your child won't tell you, look around for empty pill bottles or blister packs

### Cuts and wounds

- Apply pressure to bleeding cuts using a bandage or towel (a tea towel may be less likely to stick to the wound)
- Clean the wound under running tap water and apply a sterile adhesive dressing

If the wound has become infected (swelling, pus forming or spreading redness), encourage your child to seek medical help

### Burns

- Cool with cold water for 10 to 30 minutes, then cover with cling film
- Don't use ice or any creams or greasy substances such as butter

For more information on handling wounds and burns, and information about when to see a doctor, see [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk) or ring 111.

### Scars

If your child has scars they are embarrassed about, you can look into commercial products that may help them fade. Scars can also be covered by make-up.

Remind your child that most scars will eventually fade.

## Alternatives to self-harm

Because self-harm is helping your child to cope with difficult feelings, it is important to think of other ways they might manage their feelings. These can include distraction, stress management techniques, and thinking of alternative methods of discharging extreme emotions. Sometimes joining a social activity or sports group can be helpful as a distraction. This can also provide a form of social support.

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 (such as pencil sharpeners, knives, medication) may help to delay the impulse to self-harm.

### **Soothing/stress relief/distraction:**

- Going for a walk, looking at things and listening to sounds
- Create something: drawing, writing, music or sculpture
- Going to a public place, away from the house
- Keeping a diary or weblog
- Stroking or caring for a pet
- Watching TV or a movie
- Getting in touch with a friend
- Listening to soothing music
- Having a relaxing bath
- Wrapping a blanket around themselves
- Writing down any upsetting thoughts or feelings on a piece of paper and tearing it up
- Clenching an ice cube in the hand until it melts
- Snapping an elastic band against the wrist
- Drawing on the skin with a red pen or red paint instead of cutting
- Sports or physical exercise
- Using a punchbag
- Hitting a pillow or other soft object
- Listening to or creating loud music

Not all of these will work for your child – and that's okay. It varies from person to person and the feelings they're trying to manage. So, talk to your child about different strategies they could try but give them space to find what works for them.

### **When to seek further help**

If you are concerned about your child, particularly if the self-harm or distress increases or you notice problems such as anxiety or low mood, you should seek further help.

Telephone advice lines can give you information. If your child goes to hospital for any reason related to self-harm, they should be seen by someone who will talk to them about self-harm and assess their mental well-being. If it is not clear whether this has happened, ask the staff about it.

### **Telling others**

Think carefully about who to tell about your child's self-harming. This includes thinking about their possible reactions, and balancing your child's need for privacy with your need for support.

Many parents say secrecy can make things more difficult: it can add to the pressure on both parents and child, and take away sources of help and comfort from other family members.

Talking to people you trust can be a huge help. If you haven't told family members yet, you might consider speaking to a counsellor or calling a helpline to work through your feelings and decide how and when you might broach the topic of your child's self-harm with friends and family.

## Other family members

You and your child can think together about how much you want to tell other family members, including brothers and sisters, about the self-harm.

- Explain to other children and close family that your child is going through a difficult time – you do not need to give details
- Siblings may feel angry or that their sibling who is self-harming is being selfish and causing distress in the family
- You are still the parent: don't be afraid to set boundaries on your child's behaviour (how they treat siblings)
  
- Remember your other children need your attention and support as well
- Try to help them manage their feelings
- Watch for similar behaviours in your other children
- Remind them of other ways to cope such as talking, relaxation, sports or art
- Listen to them and remind them that you love them

The wider family may or may not understand why a child would self-harm, so you and your immediate family will have to think about how they might react and how you want to manage this.

## Attending to your own needs

Supporting someone who is self-harming can be tough. It may be a long process with lots of ups and downs. For that reason, it's important to look after yourself. Not only will this help you keep well but it will allow you to better support your child.

- Recovery from self-harm may be a long process, so try to find time for relaxation. Pay attention to the physical signs of stress, such as stomach aches, difficulty sleeping, or depression.
- Take time for yourself when you are upset. Do things you enjoy, such as going out with friends, exercise, hobbies.
- Learn to identify and accept your own feelings. It may help to write them down.
- Find an outlet for your emotions, such as talking to a friend, relative or therapist. You may find other emotions coming out as anger – be careful that your child does not think this is directed at them.
- Give yourself permission only to do things that really need doing and don't worry about less important tasks. Take time off work if you are able, and accept help from family and friends.
- Try to keep communicating
- Your child may remember what you say even if they don't seem to be listening at the time, and may take your advice or talk to you later.
- Don't give up on your child
- Trying to help your child may sometimes be frustrating. However, when they push you away is often when they need you the most.
- Remember, most young people who self-harm will stop sooner or later.

## Support for difficult times or a crisis:

Text **YM to 85258** for free mental health crisis support, any time of the day.



 

 **PAPYRUS**  
PREVENTION OF YOUNG SUICIDE  
 **HOPELINEUK**  
0800 068 41 41

**YoungMinds Parents Helpline** for detailed advice, emotional support and signposting about a child or young person up to the age of 25. Freephone 0808 802 5544 from 9:30am - 4pm, Monday - Friday. Email or webchat support is also offered: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-helpline-and-webchat>

**Apps:** CALM HARM – this app helps discover coping strategies and manage self-harm urges

**Websites:** [www.kooth.com](http://www.kooth.com) – online mental wellbeing community and support with text based and online counselling

In South West London, you can call the **24/7 Mental Health Support Line** on 0800 028 8000

**CAMHS Crisis Line** on 0203 228 5980, Monday to Friday 5pm – 11pm, and Saturday, Sunday, and Bank Holidays 9am – 11pm

**Merton CAMHS- 0208 254 8061** - available 9-5 Monday to Friday

**Sutton CAMHS - 020 3513 5000** - available 9-5 Monday to Friday