

Self-harm

Information for parents and carers



What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone intentionally harms themselves by either self-poisoning or self-injury. Types of self-harm include:

Taking an overdose

Self-cutting or burning

Banging their head

Punching themselves

Sticking things in their body

Over or under medicating

Self-harm is often a method that a person uses to manage difficult emotions, although sometimes the intention may be to take their life. Even if a young person does not intend to take their life, the behaviour needs to be taken seriously, as it may be an expression of strong despair and could lead to accidental death.

What makes people self-harm?

Research has shown that many people who harm themselves are struggling with unbearable distress or extremely stressful situations. A person may often struggle with difficulties for some time before they self-harm. Self-harm can start as a way of coping with difficulties and over time it can develop into a habit, which is difficult to break.

Self-harm can be a method of coping in a number of ways for a young person, including:

- to reduce tension
- the release of endorphins (from self-cutting), which can give immediate relief from emotional distress
- to manage emotional distress
- to distract from problems

- as a form of escape
- as an outlet for negative or difficult emotions
- to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- to take control
- to be noticed by/cared about by others
- as a way of punishing themselves or others
- as a means of non-verbal communication or as a way of communicating emotional distress (e.g. if in an abusive situation).

Who is at risk from self-harm?

A national interview survey suggested that in Great Britain between 4.6% and 6.6% of people have self-harmed. However, even this might be an underestimate. In a school survey, 13% of young people aged 15 or 16 reported having self-harmed at some time in their lives and 7% as having done so in the previous year. Overall, women are more likely to self-harm than men. This is most pronounced in adolescence, where girls may be three times more likely to self-harm than boys.

Some young people are more likely to self-harm, including those who are depressed or anxious, have low self-esteem (for example, the feelings might be related to negative body image or bullying at school), a sense of hopelessness or poor problem solving skills. Difficulties in the family or peer relationships (including persistent bullying by peers), may also increase the risk of a person self-harming.

Some young people may go onto the internet and look at websites about self-harm – some of these may be helpful and may encourage them to seek support and not self-harm, but others may increase the risk. Knowing someone else who self-harms can also increase the risk.

Finding out that your child self-harms

It is understandable that you may feel a mixture of anger, shock, guilt, worry and upset. Don't panic, your child is not alone and neither are you. Young people often struggle with home life, school pressures and achievement worries and this may be their way of communicating that they are feeling stressed.

Let your child know that you are there for them, but be aware that self-harm is often a secretive behaviour; if your child is aware that you know about it they may also find this overwhelming. There may be other things you can do that will really make a difference to the way they feel and behave.

What can I do if I know my child is self-harming?

It can be very upsetting to be close to someone who self-harms, but there are things you can do. The most important thing is to listen to them without judging them or being critical. This can be very hard if you are upset yourself (and perhaps angry) about what they are doing. Try to concentrate on them rather than your own feelings, although this can be hard. Keep an open mind.

- Make the time to listen.
- Remember to tell them that you love/care about them.
- Remind them of their strengths and positive qualities.
- Help them find different ways of coping (including distraction). (See the next section on 'coping strategies'.)
- Learn to recognise the triggers for self-harm.
- Encourage them to express their feelings.
- Make time to do enjoyable activities with your child.
- Reduce the chance of them self-harming by removing sharp objects or medication from the house (or locking items away).
- Go with them to get the right kind of help as quickly as possible.

What to do if you see your child self-harming

If the harm they have caused to themselves is serious, call 999 for immediate help. If you have questions about a small overdose or are not sure what to do, call 111 for advice.

In all other cases, seek help from your child's General Practitioner as soon as possible.

If your child needs to go to hospital: Your child will be assessed by the acute medical team and, if necessary, medical treatment will be started. All young people under the age of 16 will be admitted to hospital overnight following an overdose or other serious self-harm. A mental health assessment will be carried out the following day.

While they are being assessed and/or treated it is important that your child is reassured that no one is judging them.

Your child will be visited by the mental health team while they are in hospital. After their assessment the mental health team will either:

- Arrange a meeting with relevant professionals to plan your child's discharge from hospital.
- Give you and your child advice and information.
- Arrange for their GP to follow up, when their child is discharged.
- Arrange for your child to have a follow-up with CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) or PCAMHS (Primary Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service), including intensive support if necessary.
- Arrange for your child to be referred to Multiagency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) in order to access additional support.

Self-soothing activities

- relaxation exercises
- stroking a cat or animal
- listening to the sounds as you walk
 - having a bubble bath

Distraction activities

- having a relaxing bath
 - listening to music
- looking after an animal
- go for a walk or run
 - watching TV
 - reading a book

Coping strategies

These are some different ways that you could use to encourage your child to cope with situations, stress or feelings instead of self-harming. Even if they are able to do these on only one occasion, then this should be seen as positive.

Discharging unpleasant emotions in other ways:

- Clenching an ice cube in your hand until it melts
- Writing, drawing and talking about feelings
- Going in to a field and screaming
- Hitting a pillow or soft object

My safety net (people I can talk to)

- Mum/Dad
- Aunty/Uncle
- School Counsellor
 - Sister/Brother
- Dance/Sports teacher
 - Therapist
- School teacher
- Best friend

Effect on family and siblings

Siblings may feel confused or worried about their brother/sister, or angry that they are self-harming. You may need to let them know that their brother/sister is going through a difficult time. Give them the opportunity to talk about their feelings.

It is easy to find yourself being less available for your other children when one of your children is self-harming. Try to spend some positive time with them and reassure them that you are still there for them.

It may also be hard for your wider family to understand why your child would want to self-harm. You may want to prepare for questions they may have by thinking about how to respond to them.

Other sources of support

- your GP
- school counsellor (can be accessed through their school)
- school nurse
- Primary Care Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (PCAMHS) – a service where young people and their families can be seen for up to 6 sessions
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) – therapeutic service for young people with more serious mental health problems, following a thorough assessment
- your child's GP and their school can make a referral to the Mental Health Services
- young people over the age of 16 can refer themselves to CAMHS and PCAMHS. The phone number for the consultation line is: 01865 902 637

Further reading

- “The parent’s guide to Self-harm” by Jane Smith
- **Healthtalk.org** – follow the links to ‘Self-harm: Parents’ experiences’

Health talk online is a useful website where parents can hear the personal experiences of other carers.

Charities and support groups

Samaritans

Confidential support, 24 hours a day.

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

Childline

Free, confidential support for young people.

Tel: 0800 11 11

Website: www.childline.org

Harmless

Self-harm support.

Website: www.harmless.org.uk

Email: info@harmless.org.uk

Papyrus

Prevention of young suicide.

Tel: 0800 068 41 41

Website: www.papyrus-uk.org

Mind

Mental health charity.

Website: www.mind.org.uk

Young Minds

Support for parents and carers worried about a child or young person.

Parent Helpline: 0808 802 5544

Website: www.youngminds.org.uk

Remember to take extra care of yourself

Helping your child recover from self-harm will take energy and patience. It can be difficult coping with self-harm in someone you are close to. Don't be afraid to seek extra support for yourself while you are helping your child. It may be difficult for you to support your child if you also become stressed, tired or upset.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter,
a document in Easy Read, another language, large print,
Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473**
or email **PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk**

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