

Self-harm: Advice from the West Berkshire Emotional Health Academy

What is self-harm?

Self-harm means deliberately causing harm to oneself. Reasons behind self-harm can be varied but may include bullying, relationship difficulties with peers and at home, anxiety, depression, and trauma.

Types of self-harm include:

- Cutting, burning, biting
- Substance abuse
- Head banging and hitting
- Taking personal risks or neglecting oneself
- Picking and scratching and pulling out hair
- Eating disorders
- Overdosing and self-poisoning

Self-harm may serve several purposes at the same time. It may be a way of coping, by expressing pain or being distracted from it, of communicating feelings to somebody else, and of finding comfort.

It can also be a means of self-punishment or an attempt to gain some control over life. People who self-harm may feel ashamed, afraid, or worried about other people's reactions so they often conceal what they are doing rather than draw attention to it.

Whilst some individuals who self-harm may have suicidal feelings, those feelings are likely to originate from the experiences and traumas behind their self-harm rather than being influenced by self-harm itself.

Self-harming does not always lead to suicide and can be a coping mechanism to avoid feeling like that. However, it is important where possible to tackle self-harm behaviours early.



There can be many warning signs that something is wrong. They can include:

- Changes in eating/sleeping patterns
- Isolation from friends and family
- Mood changes eg more aggressive or emotional than usual
- Getting lower grades at school
- Talking about self-harm or suicide
- Using drugs or alcohol
- Talking of hopelessness or feelings of failure
- Unexplained scars, covering up (eg wearing long sleeved tops in very hot weather)

Coping with self-harm

If a young person is self-harming, it can be very difficult to cope with your own feelings of fear, shock, anger, guilt, grief, and helplessness. You may also be very worried about the young person and what will happen to them.

Although you may feel helpless to help someone, what you do or don't do can make a lot of difference. Don't ignore what's happening.

If you pay due attention to someone's injuries, you affirm that they and their body are worth caring about. But don't just focus on the injuries. It's important that you appreciate how difficult they are finding life. Showing them you want to understand how they are feeling will matter a great deal. Tell the young person that you want to understand how they are feeling and want to help.

You can begin by gently encouraging them to talk to someone about why they self-harm. You may find what they have to say difficult to hear. If it feels too much for you, help them to find someone else to talk to. It's possible to be honest with them about your own feelings and not to panic, blame them, treat them as if they are mad, or make them feel guilty.

Being uncritical will help them feel accepted and cared for, instead of even more self-hating. Don't force them to talk though and don't seek support for them without their permission – this may cause them to withdraw from you and make them feel they have no control. Writing a letter, drawing or communicating via text how they are feeling may be easier for some young people.

Be honest about your own feelings but try not to be critical or blame the young person. Try not to make them feel guilty either or treat them as if they have mental health problems. This will help them feel accepted and cared for.



Things to remember when talking to a young person about self-harm

Be positive

Keep emphasising all the positive aspects of the person's life to help develop and support their sense of self-worth.

Be realistic

Don't expect change to happen quickly, and don't hold on to any expectation that the young person can stop self-harming just because you want them to. People who self-harm are trying to resist feeling the full weight of their emotions. This defence mechanism can't be dismantled easily. It takes time for people to learn that they can cope with their feelings. It's important you resist the temptation to step in, constantly, to try to solve the problem. In the end, each individual has to draw on their own strengths and find their own inner resources.

Look after yourself

It is normal for parents to experience strong emotions when they learn their child is self-harming and it is important that you look after yourself as well as them. Recovery from self-harm may be a long process, so try to find time for yourself to relax and do things you enjoy. Pay attention to the physical signs of stress, such as stomach aches, difficulty sleeping, or depression, and take time for yourself when you are upset. Seek support from family, friends or professionals if you feel you need to.

Alternatives to self-harm

There are many alternatives to self-harm that a young person could explore. Some of these include:

- Drawing on themselves with a marker pen
- Snapping an elastic band on their wrist
- Go for a walk or other exercise to distract themselves
- Drawing
- Writing
- Spending time with another person
- Mindfulness and mediation
- Setting a target of 10 minutes in which not to self-harm, then extending this to 15 minutes etc till the feelings pass
- Shred paper



Helpful websites

These websites provide helpful information and resources to people who self-harm, as well as for friends and families who are seeking advice and support.

[Self Harm UK including the Alumina course](#): free online self-harm support for 14-19's.

[Charlie Waller Trust Parents and Carers Guide](#): a free guide for parents & carers on the nature & causes of self harm and how to support a young person.

[Harmless website](#): provides support and information about self harm to individuals who self harm, their friends, families and professionals.

[NHSN Website](#): National Self Harm Network. A forum that supports and provides information to individuals who self harm and their families.

Support

[YoungMinds.org.uk](#) is a charity committed to improving the mental health of young people. Support for those worried about a young person's behaviour or mental health. Provides information on a range of subjects relevant to young people.

Their free parents' helpline is open Monday - Friday from 9.30am-4.00pm on **0808 802 5544**

Apps

The following apps have been developed to support people who self-harm to help them manage their emotions, distract them and to reduce urges to self harm.

[Blue Ice App](#)

[Calm Harm App](#)

[distrACT App](#)

[You can also find more information on our website](#)

