



Self-harm

About self-harm

Self-harm, or self-injury, describes a wide range of things people deliberately do to themselves that appear to cause some kind of physical hurt or injury but usually do not kill them. Self-harm is not usually a failed attempt at suicide, but it can still be very hard for parents and carers to know about - or witness - self-harming behaviour in their children.

Cutting the arms or the back of the legs with a razor, knife or glass shards is the most common form of self-harm, but it can take many forms, including burning, biting, hitting oneself, banging head onto walls/doors, pulling out hair (trichotillomania), inserting objects into the body or taking overdoses.

Risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking, taking drugs and having unprotected sex are also seen by some as a form of self-harming.

Reasons for self-harm

A person may self-harm to help them cope with negative feelings and difficult experiences, to feel more in control, or to punish themselves. It can be a way of relieving overwhelming feelings that build up inside, to:

- reduce tension
- manage extreme emotional upset
- provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- regain control over feelings or problems
- identify with a peer group

The feelings or experiences that might be connected to self-harm include anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, poor body image, gender identity, sexuality, abuse, school problems, bullying, social media pressure, family or friendship troubles and bereavement.

Over time, self-harming 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.

What can help? What to do next

These are some things that may really make a difference:

1. Discovering your child is self-harming will inevitably have a big emotional effect on you. But it's very important that you stay calm and let them know that you're there to help and support them.
2. Try not to take it personally or blame yourself. Just concentrate on showing you understand and want to help.
3. If your child wants to talk about their self-harm and why they're doing it, sit down and listen. If they're finding it hard to speak to you face-to-face then why not suggest they put their thoughts into an email or letter instead?
4. Avoid asking your child lots of questions all at once.
5. Keep an eye on your child but avoid 'policing' them because this can increase their risk of self-harming, and giving them their own space will help build up their confidence and trust.
6. Consider whether your child is self-harming in areas that can't be seen.
7. Remember that self-harm is a coping mechanism. It is a symptom of an underlying problem so try to talk about how they're feeling and work out alternative coping mechanisms together. This might be a hobby or talking to friends and family.
8. Keep open communication between you and your child and remember they may feel ashamed of their self-harm and find it very difficult to talk about. Here are some ways you could start the conversation.
9. Talk to your child but try not to get into a hostile confrontation.
10. If they have any current wounds that require medical attention then do not delay going to the hospital.
11. Keep firm boundaries and don't be afraid of disciplining your child. It is helpful to keep a sense of normality and this will help your child feel secure and emotionally stable.
12. If you feel confident, you can ask them whether removing whatever they are using to self-harm is likely to cause them to use something less sanitary to self-harm with, or whether it reduces temptation. This can be a difficult question to ask and if you are not confident to ask this seek professional advice.
13. Seek professional help. Your child may need a risk assessment from a qualified mental health professional. Talk to your GP and explore whether your child can be referred to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
14. Discovering and responding to self-harm can be a traumatic experience – it's crucial that you seek support for yourself. It's natural to feel guilt, shame, anger, sadness, frustration and despair – but it's not your fault.

Finding support

All resources listed on this sheet are for information only. While every effort has been made to ensure accuracy, YoungMinds cannot accept responsibility for changes to details made by other organisations.

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| Youth Access www.youthaccess.org.uk Offers information about advice and counselling services in the UK for young people aged 12-25 years. | Youth Wellbeing Directory www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing Lists local services for young people's mental health and wellbeing. |
| Finding a private counsellor or therapist If this is an affordable option for you, you can find accredited private child and adolescent counsellors and therapists living locally to you by searching the following directories. Counselling directory: www.counselling-directory.org.uk BACP: www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists UKCP: www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist | |
| Support for you | |
| YoungMinds www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-self-harm Information and videos from our Parents Helpline and parents' own experiences. www.youngminds.org.uk/take20 Ideas and suggestions for finding 20 minutes to do something together with your child to support their confidence, self-esteem and resilience. | YoungMinds Parents Helpline Our Parents Helpline is available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25. Call us for free on 0808 802 5544. We're open Monday-Friday from 9.30am-4pm. |
| Self-harm and young people: a guide for parents and carers www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-7hms54sF8 A 17-minute film made by YMCA Right Here Brighton for parents, carers and any other adults concerned about a young person who is self-harming. | |