

# Self Harm

# Supporting Children and

# Young People



# What is self harm?

Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves on purpose to manage distressing or overwhelming feelings or experiences. Someone who is self-harming may be dealing with lots of intense thoughts and feelings. Hurting themselves can feel like the only way to cope. Or they might feel numb and hurt themselves so they can feel something.

If your child is self-harming, or you're concerned they might be, it can be incredibly worrying. The important thing to remember is that lots of young people go through this and come out the other side with different ways of coping. You also need to remember that you're not alone.

# Ways that young people may self harm

Some ways that young people self-harm include:

- cutting themselves or pricking the skin with sharp objects
- scratching skin with fingernails
- deliberately picking open old wounds or scabs
- burning skin
- biting skin
- hitting themselves, or banging their head or another part of their body on a wall
- pulling at their head and body hair
- inserting objects into their body

# **Signs that a child or young person is self harming**

Self-harm is often done in secrecy and on areas of the body which are easier to hide through clothing, such as the upper arms and thighs. This may mean it is easy to miss at first.

However, parents and carers might start to notice unexplained scarring or cuts which may even resemble patterns on their child's body. Their child may repeatedly report injuries caused by random 'accidents' to try to explain noticeable scratches or bruises and the frequency of these instances might raise a red flag and indicate that there's something more to be concerned about.

# **Signs that a child or young person is self harming**

## **Things to look out for:**

- Unexplained cuts, burns, bite-marks, bruises or bald patches.
- Covering up their body. They might wear long sleeves or trousers during hot weather, not want to change clothes around others, or avoid activities like swimming.
- Bloody tissues in bins.
- Seeming low or depressed, eg, withdrawing from friends and family.
- Blaming themselves for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness or hopelessness.
- Outbursts of anger or argumentativeness.

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Having found out my child was self-harming, I was so devastated and confused as to why. My emotions were all over the place, not knowing how to help her, where to go for professional help – it was so stressful. As a father I just wanted to wrap her up in cotton wool.

”

**Parent**

# Reasons why a young person might self harm

If a young person is self harming, it's often a sign that something isn't quite right or has become too much to deal with. It can be understood as a message about how a young person is feeling – one that needs to be noticed with care by the adults around them.

Self-harm is usually a way of trying to manage very difficult feelings. People often harm themselves when life feels hard to cope with - when distressing feelings have built up and become overwhelming. In the moment, physical pain can be easier than feeling emotionally out of control.



# Reasons why a young person might self harm

You might hear myths about self-harm, including that it's a 'phase', or attention-seeking. In fact, while it might feel hard to understand from the outside, self-harm can be a way for a young person to:

- Manage, reduce or express very strong and upsetting emotions like hurt, sadness, anger, fear or feeling bad about themselves.
- Relieve tension and pressure, or reduce feelings of panic and anxiety, to temporarily feel calmer.

# Reasons why a young person might self harm

- Experience a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain.
- Gain a sense of control over feelings or problems – for example by feeling there's something they can do when things feel too much.
- Stop feeling numb or 'zoned-out', a protective process our bodies use when we're overwhelmed.

# Reasons why a young person might self harm

Yet while self-harm can bring relief in the moment, this is only temporary. As feelings build up again, so does the urge to self-harm.

As this cycle continues, someone might start to feel ashamed, confused, or frightened. This increases the load they're already carrying, becoming a cycle that's hard to break and a habit that's hard to stop.

**“Often it’s a way for people to let out feelings that are hard to explain or control.”**

**Joe, young person**

# Common issues

It can be challenging for parents and carers to know that their child is injuring themselves and that there may be very little they can do to prevent it. They may instinctively want to tell their child to simply stop hurting themselves, but this is rarely effective as it dismisses a strategy which the child or young person finds helpful and has control over and could lead to further withdrawal and increased harm.

Parents and carers may face similar conflicts and can often feel like they are walking on a tightrope between trying to address the issue and risking their child becoming more upset and harming themselves. Will, for example, removing a sharp object prevent harm or risk being replaced by something more unsafe?

# Common issues

Will letting a child or young person know that you've found blood on their clothing open conversation or push them away from you?

What is the balance between keeping your child safe and overly monitoring or policing them?

How can you ensure your child's injuries don't become infected if they refuse to seek treatment?

These are all difficult questions to have to think through in the moment, so seeking professional advice and guidance is essential for both you and your child.

# **How to support a child or young person who is self harming**

As there is a lot of shame attached to self-harm, it may take time for a child or young person who self-harms to open up to you even if they're aware that you know they self-harm. Practicing patience is therefore important.

Try not to bombard your child with questions but ensure they know that you love them and that their wellbeing, both physical and mental, is extremely important to you.

# Supporting with the urge

When the urge to self-harm does build, it's useful for your child to have a list of other things they can do instead. This can help 'ride the wave' of intense feelings without self-harming.

Different things will work for different people. What helps usually depends on the feelings your child is trying to manage. If your child wants to feel soothed, they might want to wrap themselves up in a comfy space. If they want to burn off energy, doing something active can help.

Your child might want to use an app like [Calm Harm](#) so they have something on their phone that suggests different techniques they can try when they feel the urge to self-harm.

# Strategies to try when they feel like self harming

Making and using a self soothe box

Writing down their feelings in a journal.

Write down difficult feelings on paper and rip it up.

Hitting a cushion, pillow or bean bag.

Listening to loud music.

Having a shower.

Go outside for a walk.

Focus on their breathing - feel your body when breathing in and out.

Wrapping up tightly in a blanket or a duvet.

Talk to someone, a friends, family member or helpline.

Tidying or organising something.

Crossing the arms, place one hand in icy water and the other in warm water.

Use an elastic band over the wrist to produce the sensation of pain.

# **Supporting your child to manage their feelings**

There are a number of things that might empower your child to feel more in control. Becoming more aware of what they're feeling when they self-harm can help, as can understanding what's making them want to do it. They might also want to think about what could help them stop. This knowledge can reduce overwhelm and their need to self-harm. To support them with this, you can:

 **Try to open up a conversation about what's going on.**

It might help to start this while walking outside or doing an activity to keep the chat more relaxed. It can also help both of you to be in a neutral space - e.g. not in their bedroom.

Understandably, you might have lots of questions. It's important to remember your child is going through a tough time and may find this overwhelming. Focus on finding out how they're doing without bombarding them.



## **Keep communication as open as you can, letting your child know they can talk to you anytime.**

Your child might feel ashamed about self-harming and find it difficult to talk about. Let them come to you when they feel ready, and reassure them that they can talk to you as often and for as long as they need to.

If your child is struggling to open up, they might find it easier to text or write a letter, or communicate how they feel through writing, pictures, or music. This can be particularly helpful for neurodiverse young people. Receiving information this way also gives you time to process what they've told you, and think about how you'd like to respond without immediately reacting.

## **Stay calm and non-judgemental.**

When your child does open up, try to focus on listening, showing empathy and being curious about what it's like for them, rather than trying to 'fix' things. Sometimes they'll just want you to listen and understand how they are feeling - not be given a solution.

## **Think together about what's causing them to self harm.**

Self-harm is usually a symptom of something else that's going on. Are there things like relationships or experiences at home or school that are making them feel worried, frightened, upset or angry? Are there changes that could be made to make things better? Taking pressures away can help reduce feelings of overwhelm.



## **Help them to notice when the urge to self-harm builds, and how they're feeling when that happens.**

What kinds of thoughts are they having, and how do they feel in their body? For example, they might start to feel more zoned out or like they're full of panic. This can help them recognise what feelings they're trying to deal with, and what they can do instead to manage them. Keeping a mood diary might help them understand this over time - and can be as simple as a noted-down word, phrase or emoji every day.



## **Spend quality time together doing activities they enjoy.**

Even if it's just for a little while, doing something fun can give your child a break and help them relax. This might be drawing, making something, playing sport, cooking, or watching a favourite film together.



## **Help them do the daily things that support wellbeing.**

Getting up at a regular time, eating regular healthy meals, exercising, drinking water, spending quality time with loved ones and getting enough sleep can help (teens need a minimum of 8-10 hours per night). It might help to think about limits around screen time as part of this.



## **Ask your child if there are things that would help them to feel more safe.**

Think about replacing potentially harmful everyday items with safer alternatives. Some young people, might use the safety pins they use to secure their hijab or other items of clothing to harm themselves. In cases like this, you might want to secure clothes in a different way with magnets or clips. Certain things in the house might trigger them - ask them about this, and try to find ways to remove or reduce them.



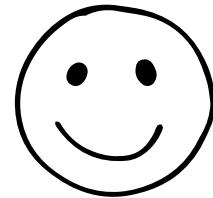
## **Keep an eye on your child without making them feel policed.**

It's completely natural that you might want to watch over them when you know they self-harm. While monitoring the situation is good, sensing they're being watched may increase your child's anxiety and guilt. When it feels possible and they need it, give them some space.



## **Seek professional advice or help.**

There are lots of things you can do to help your child. But lots of young people will need professional help to shift the situation and feel better. You can find out how to access help below.



## **Young people tell us it's helpful when parents.....**

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- Are open-minded and don't make assumptions.
- Remember that their child is not doing this for attention – it's their way of letting out the pain on their terms.
- Let their child know they are there to help and aren't going to judge them.
- Listen to them and offer reassurance. Things like 'I'm proud of you', 'we will get through this together' and 'I recognise your pain and want to help' will go a long way.



## **Young people tell us it's unhelpful when parents.....**

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- Put too much pressure on their child to stop.
- Force their child to talk when they're not ready.
- Minimise their child's feelings by saying things like 'it's only puberty', 'it's just a phase' or 'you need to grow up'.

“My mum and dad came into my room and did something brilliant for me. They accepted it. They didn't shout at me or tell me off.

## Young person

“Check in with your child on a regular basis. It can be easy to feel that everything is back to normal when your child appears to be coping, but it's essential to monitor what's really happening for your child.

## Parent

# What to say to siblings?

It can be a very debilitating and traumatic experience for siblings to witness someone self-harming and parents and carers should take steps to try to minimise exposure. Younger children could be extremely frightened by the thought of their brother or sister self-harming so parents and carers should be mindful not to be too descriptive when talking to them. Older siblings may also be shocked and frightened but should be able to process the realities of self-harm and be encouraged to talk openly and ask questions about anything they see or witness.

# What to say to siblings?

Siblings sometimes end up feeling frustrated and might even feel that the child is engaging in self-harm to seek attention. However, it is important for parents and carers to make sure siblings are aware of the seriousness of the situation and don't do or say things that could make it worse for the child or young person. Siblings may also require professional help to process any trauma they experience.

# What to say to schools and colleges?

Self-harm is a serious mental health problem and can be difficult for schools and colleges to handle at times. However, it is important to notify your child's school to ensure that they know that your child is vulnerable and potentially at risk.

Teachers may find it hard to speak to students about self-harm but, as with parents and carers, talking about the issue won't cause more harm but may remind the child or young person that there is a wide circle of support available to them should they have thoughts of self-harming. Showing concern is often more useful than trying to tell a child to stop self-harming which is often ineffective and should be discouraged as should disclosing the issue to other students which is often not helpful and could lead to bullying or gossip.

# What to say to schools and colleges?

It is important for parents and carers to communicate with schools and for teachers and the wider pastoral team to know what to do if self-harming has occurred. This may include calling 999 for an ambulance if they fear a child has overdosed or has caused serious bodily harm. Most self-harm isn't linked to suicidality but if a staff member is told that a child or young person wants to die they have a care of duty and safeguarding responsibility to report this and parents and carers should enquire as to the schools policies regarding this practice and understand the legal processes schools and colleges must conform to.

# **What to say to extended family?**

There is a lot of stigma attached to self-harm. It is often seen as a weakness or an attention-seeking act. Parents and carers need to have an open conversation with their child to find out if they are comfortable with the extended family finding out as it might bring undue attention and make things worse for them. Extended family can be informed of the fact that the child is struggling without giving all the details though if a child visits relatives regularly, particularly if they stay overnight, then parents and carers should consider making them aware of the self-harm so as to be prepared should an incident occur.

# **What to say to extended family?**

As a family it can be very frightening and exhausting supporting someone who self-harms. Whilst the focus should be on supporting the child, parents and carers should be aware of impact on all members of the family including themselves and seek professional help or support where necessary.

# Finding professional help

Trying to find the right help for your child and finding your way around different services can be really tiring at times – so keep reminding yourself that you're doing your best and that it's not easy.

Some young people who are self-harming will find it very difficult to speak to a professional, go to appointments or even acknowledge what's going on.

There are different places to find help for your child.

Speaking to your GP is often a good start. They can discuss concerns, speak to your child to find out how they're doing, and let you know what support options are available. You can speak to the GP yourself to ask for advice, even if your child doesn't want to talk to them.

# Finding professional help

Depending on the situation, the GP can also refer them for an assessment by a mental health specialist, or to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Referrals can be made to CAMHS for young people up to the age of 18 years old, or to adult mental health services for young people aged 18 and over.

Schools, colleges, and universities are another good source of support. They can also refer to mental health services, and often have their own mental health provision. Referrals from school can be very useful. They see the young person on a daily basis and can sometimes give more insight into their needs.

# **Tips from parents who've been in this situation**

Parents have found the following things helpful when seeking professional help:

- If you're feeling under a lot of strain, or like the situation is too much to manage, it may be a sign you need professional help.
- Try to speak to professionals early on before things have escalated to crisis.
- Encourage your child to give themselves some time to get to know a professional and build trust. Remember that they might be starting from a very withdrawn place.

# **Tips from parents who've been in this situation**

- Remind your child that therapy is not always easy. Finding it difficult is normal, rather than a sign it's not working.
- Ask if you can see the same professional each time so that you don't have to keep re-explaining the situation.
- Be open minded about different types of treatment. What works for your child might not be the same as what would work for you.

# Keeping your child safe

It's important to take your child to hospital or to your GP if they have any injuries that require medical attention.

Self-harm is often a way to help someone cope. It isn't necessarily an expression of suicidal feelings or an attempt to take their own life.

But people who experience suicidal thoughts are more likely to have self-harmed in the past. If you're worried your child may be experiencing suicidal thoughts, read our guide to find out how you can access help.

# Looking after yourself

Finding out that your child is self-harming can be an incredibly distressing, or even traumatic, experience. It's completely normal to feel anxious, confused, sad, angry, frustrated, guilty or ashamed.

Try to take time when you can to check in with yourself, and to think about ways you can take care of yourself too. It's okay to ask for help when you need it, and to share your worries with someone you trust.

# Looking after yourself

Many parents in this situation find it helpful to reach out to other parents to talk through how they have handled difficult situations and found support. You may also be able to find a local parent support group.

If you need more help, speaking to your GP is a good place to start. They may be able to refer you to a local support service. Sometimes it helps just having someone there who can listen to what you're going through. If you need someone to talk to, you can call the Samaritans any time on 116 123.

“ Don't panic. Seek help. Make sure you're eating, drinking and sleeping properly yourself. ”

**Jane, Parent**

“ Try to ignore the feelings of guilt about helping yourself. You need to be well, both physically and mentally, to support your child to the best of your ability. You need to take extra care during this difficult time. ”

**Dan, Parent**

# Useful helplines and websites

While we take care to ensure that the organisations we signpost to provide high quality information and advice, we cannot take responsibility for any specific pieces of advice they may offer. We encourage parents and carers to always explore the website of a linked service or organisation to understand who they are and what support they offer before engaging with them.

## **Calm Harm**

A free app providing support and strategies to help you resist or manage the urge to self harm.

Can be downloaded from Google Play or App Store.

# Useful helplines and websites

## YoungMinds Parents Helpline

We support parents and carers who are concerned about their child or young person's mental health. Our Parents Helpline provides detailed advice and information, emotional support and signposting.

**You can speak to us over the phone or chat to us online.**

**You can speak to us over webchat between 9.30am and 4pm from Monday-Friday.**

**When we're closed, you can still leave us a message in the chat.**

**We'll reply to you by email in 3-5 working days.**

**Opening times:**

**9.30am-4pm, Monday-Friday**

**0808 802 5544**

# Useful helplines and websites

## Childline

If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small.

Sign up for a free Childline locker (real name or email address not needed) to use their free 1-2-1 counsellor chat and email support service.

**Can provide a BSL interpreter** if you are deaf or hearing-impaired.

Hosts **online message boards** where you can share your experiences, have fun and get support from other young people in similar situations.

Opening times:

24/7

0800 11 11