

Self-Harm

What is it?

“Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences” (MIND, 2019).

Some common reasons why children and young people self-harm include: to turn emotional pain into physical pain; to reduce overwhelming feelings or thoughts; to gain a sense of control; to punish themselves; to stop feeling numb or disconnected; to create a reason to physically care for themselves; and to communicate suicidal feelings without taking their own life.

Self-harm includes self-injury (such as cutting, scratching or biting their body, inserting objects into their body, burning their body, interfering with wounds or pulling out their hair) and self-poisoning (taking an overdose of medication or drugs, swallowing bleach or other chemicals, or inhaling glue or petrol).

Signs

- Marks on their body that appear too ordered to be accidental, or inconsistent with the story of how they were sustained
- Blood stains on clothing, or finding tissues with blood on them
- Frequently engaging in activities that cause physical injury
- Regularly bandaged areas of the body
- Reluctance to take part in activities that require them to change clothes
- Wearing long sleeves and trousers, especially during hot weather
- Wincing from pain if someone or something touches an area of their body
- Use of strategies such as snapping an elastic band on their wrist
- Scars from previous self-harm

Suggestions for Parents

Information provided by the Anna Freud Centre:

- **Don't panic!** The worst thing you can do is to do nothing and ignore the self-harm – talking about the problem will not encourage more self-harm.
- **Speak with them** – Invite them to tell you about the self-harm and any problems or worries they might want to share. This should be an invitation and not a demand to share everything. It may take a few invitations to talk before they feel able to risk sharing with you - the most important thing you can do is offer to listen.



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- **Don't tell them to “just stop doing it”** – The self-harm will always be of great importance to your child and may be their only coping mechanism - so just stopping might leave them more at risk.
- **Make a plan** – This might be as simple as making another time to listen to them, or it might be to go to your GP to seek a referral to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). What is important is that you and your child discuss and (ideally) agree on the plan.
- **Share resources** – Some children and young people can find it difficult to talk to their parents about self-harm, as they don't want to worry or upset them. Let your child know about available services, helplines and text-lines that they can seek support from - you can find some of these at the end of this guide.
- **Show them you love them** – People who self-harm often worry that others will view them with disgust or shame - showing that you still love and care for them will go a long way. Voice this to them and engage in an activity together, such as cooking, making a playlist, being creative or going for a walk.
- **Take care of yourself** – Knowing that your child has self-harmed can be difficult for parents. It's natural to feel upset, shocked, scared, angry, guilty, confused and despondent. Make sure you seek support for yourself to manage these feelings.
- **If they are actively suicidal:** If they are clear they want to die, they have a plan and intend to act on that plan immediately, make sure someone stays with them – you still have time to seek advice as long as they are kept safe with someone. If they have already taken an overdose - or if you suspect have might have - get them to A&E for a medical assessment and treatment for the poisoning.

Strategies:

One strategy is for your child to find ways to replace the behaviour with other, safer ways of coping. Consider the function that self-harm plays for your child and what non-injurious behaviours could achieve this. For instance, if the self-harm functions to turn emotional pain into physical pain they could hold ice cubes on their skin; if it functions to release negative feelings about themselves they could draw themselves and write the harm they are imagining onto the drawing; or if it functions to generate self-care they could put plasters or bandages on where they want to self-harm.

Another strategy is for your child to create a self-harm timeline (a version is available from the National Self Harm Network website, linked below) to document changes in their self-harming behaviours, such as the amount, the type and the method. This can help them to understand triggers, associations and protective factors.

Ways they could minimise harm can also be explored, such as through encouraging them to use clean, non-rusted objects and clean and bandage themselves afterwards to reduce the risk of infection, as well as choosing areas of the body that are less dangerous.



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Useful websites / Resources



YMCA Right Here Brighton

Watch 'Self-Harm & Young People: A Guide for Parents & Carers':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-7hms54sF8>

Young Minds

For free advice and support from the Parents Helpline, call: 0808 802 5544

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents>

Head Above the Waves – Online resources on coping strategies and alternatives to self-harm

<https://hatw.co.uk/>

AMBER Project – Cardiff-based group, specifically for young people who self-harm

Tel: 029 2034 4776; Text/Phone: 07905 905437; Email: amber.project@churcharmy.org

<https://www.amberproject.org.uk/>

SHOUT - A text-based crisis service

Text shout to: 85258

<https://www.giveusashout.org>

MEIC – National helpline for young people who self-harm

Call: 080880 23456; Text: 84001, or chat online

<https://www.meiccyrmu.org>

National Self Harm Network - A support forum for individuals who self-harm

www.nshn.co.uk

This document is available in Welsh / Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg



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