

Coping with Self-Harm

A booklet for young people



Paediatric Psychology and Liaison Service

Royal Hospital for Children and Young People

Please note that this booklet discusses methods of self-harm in detail, and contains content that may be difficult to read or can cause distress.

Please only read this when you feel safe to do so. In an emergency remember to dial 999.

We hope that you find this booklet useful for helping you manage your experience of self-harm. Please do work through this resource at your own pace either by yourself, with a parent or carer, or your clinician.

With thanks to Mind.

What is self-harm?

People self-harm for many different reasons. Self-harm involves hurting yourself as a way of coping with difficult feelings, memories, overwhelming experiences and situations. Not everyone who self-harms has depression, and your experience of self-harm may look very different to someone else. Some reasons may include self harm:

- as a coping strategy for managing difficult life events, experiences, thoughts or feelings
- as a way of turning thoughts into physical sensations
- as an escape or stress reliever
- to feel in control
- to stop feeling numb or disconnected from reality
- as a form of punishment
- to express or to manage thoughts of suicide

Your experience may be a combination of these, or you may have a different reason for self-harming. Self-harming may give you a sense of release or a way to manage feelings of stress and difficult emotions in the short term; but it doesn't help to tackle the reason you are feeling distressed and the cause of this is unlikely to have gone away. The emotions that self-harm can bring about can also be very difficult.

Why do people self-harm?

There are lots of reasons why people self-harm, and it can be different for everyone. Sometimes, self-harm is tied to a specific experience and is a way of coping with an ongoing situation or something that happened in the past. Other times, the reasons are less clear, or may be complicated and there is not just one reason why the person is self-harming.

Some people think that people who self-harm do it to get attention. Comments like this can leave you feeling very alone and judged, and in reality, a lot of people keep their self-harm private. However, if you are self-harming as a way of communicating your distress, you are not wrong or less important for doing this. There is nothing wrong with wanting people to notice and acknowledge your distress and be taken seriously, and you deserve to be seen and heard.

Who self-harms?

People of all ages, genders and backgrounds self-harm. It's not just teenagers or adults either – young children can self-harm, even if they don't understand what they're doing is self-harm. It is also not always caused by mental health problems, and can be due to sensory differences (e.g. hair-pulling).

You may have also heard of the myth of girls self-harming more than boys. While girls are seen more often by doctors or other services for self-harm, this does not mean that boys self-harm less. Self-harm can be hidden by anger, and some people may hide it more than others.

There are some factors that may make you more vulnerable to self-harming. For instance, we know that people in the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to consider suicide and self-harm (likely because of discrimination that can be faced), coming from a more difficult social background or having a difficult relationship with parents/caregivers growing up are all linked to higher levels of self-harm. Also, factors like abuse, substance use, mental illness and problems with friends and family are all risks for self-harming.

How do people self-harm?

People can self-harm in different ways. If you think you might be self-harming, speak to an adult you trust or a health professional like your GP. Some ways that people self-harm include:

- cutting yourself
- over or under-eating
- exercising too much
- biting, picking or pulling your skin
- burning yourself
- hitting yourself or against objects
- misusing alcohol and drugs (prescription and recreational)
- pulling your hair
- putting yourself in unsafe or risky situations

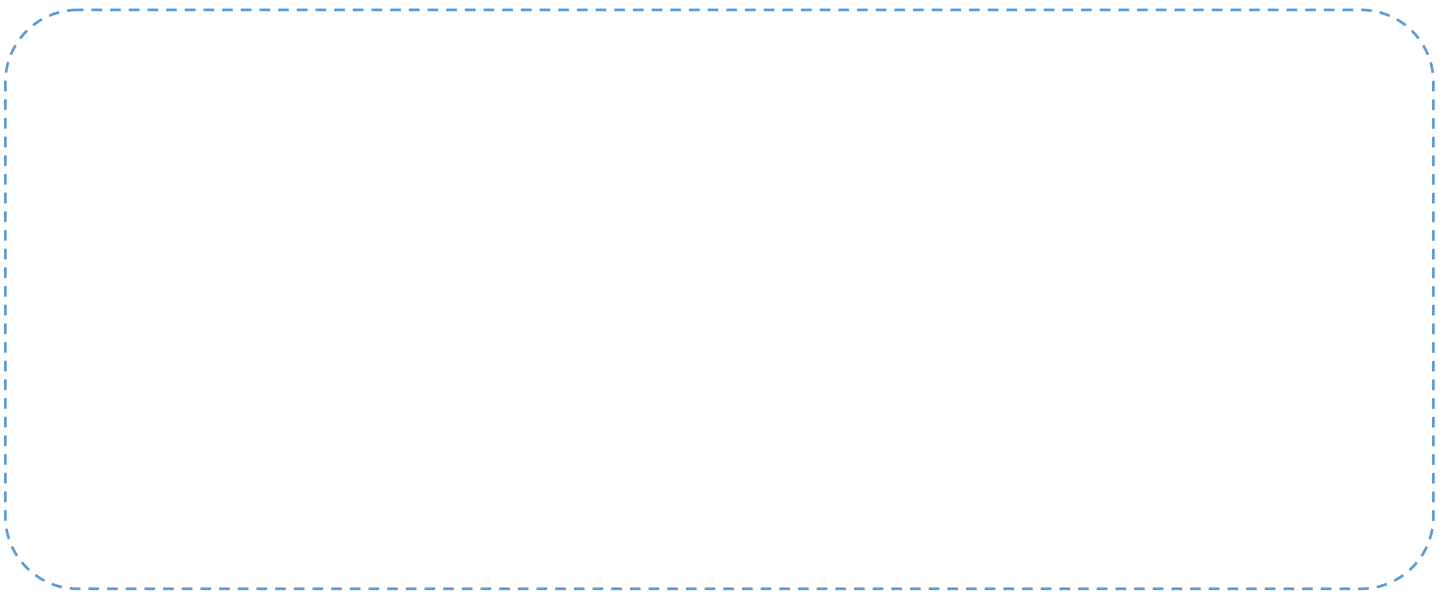
Sometimes, people self-harm an area that is linked to a previous trauma. For example, picking or cutting over surgery scars. Some people also self-harm at specific times of the day, or in specific places.

If you self-harm, it is important you know how to look after your injuries. Accessing a first-aid kit will be important, but do contact your GP or NHS 24 (dial 111) if you are concerned or need advice on how to take care of an injury. **In an emergency, do not hesitate to call 999.**

Even though we know that there are always reasons behind why people self-harm, it is important to understand that there are risks that come with this and it can put your life in danger. Once you start to rely on self-harm as a coping strategy, it can be difficult to stop. It can also become more risky with time. It is important to remember that you can be supported to find new ways of coping.

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If it is hard to say with words, use the space below to draw a picture, write song lyrics, or use in any way that you would like:



What can I do to help myself now?

When you have an intense urge to hurt yourself, it can be very difficult to stop. It may be hard to imagine doing anything else in that moment. There are steps that you can take to help you make other choices over time, reducing your self-harm.

❖ Understand your patterns

Is there a pattern to your self-harm? Are there situations, thoughts or feelings that increases the urge to hurt yourself? Noticing these things can help you recognise the urge to self-harm coming on. Even if you are not able to stop, it can be very helpful to reflect on the experience afterwards. Notice where you are, what you were feeling, who you were with or not with.

You can recognise your triggers by noting down what was happening just before you self-harmed:

- Did you have any particular thoughts?
- Did a person, situation, or object remind you of something difficult?

You can also identify the feelings you have in your body before you self-harm:

- Strong emotions like sadness, frustration or anger
- A disconnection from yourself or loss of sensation

- Racing heart, sweating, feelings of heaviness
- Repetitive thoughts about self-harming or how you would do it

Recognising these signs can help you spot them faster, which over time may help you in reducing your self-harm.

❖ Identify distractions

Distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm can give you some breathing space, reducing the intensity to follow through with these urges. Finding a distraction can be done as soon as you feel the urge, or when you are aware that you are self-harming. Below are some suggestions for distractions for different emotions you might be feeling. Be aware that you may feel a mixture of emotions, and may wish to combine different methods to find the ones that fit for you:

◆ If you feel anger and frustration

- Exercise
- Hit a cushion
- Shout out loud
- Tear paper up into lots of pieces
- Go for a run

◆ If you feel sadness and fear

- Wrap a warm blanket around yourself
- Spend time with a pet
- Take a walk in nature
- Let yourself cry or sleep
- Listen to soothing music
- Tell someone how you feel
- Try a breathing technique like box or belly breathing. Focus on your breath and practice controlled breathing in then out until you feel calmer.

◆ If you feel numb

- Flick an elastic band on your wrist

- Hold ice cubes
- Smell something strong smell or taste something with a strong flavour
- Have a cold shower

♦ **If you feel a need to control**

- Write lists
- Tidy up
- Declutter
- Write a letter saying everything you are feeling
- Weed a garden
- Clench then relax all your muscles

♦ **If you feel shame**

- Spend time with people who you feel safe with and who make you feel good about yourself
- Recognise when you are trying to be perfect and try to accept that everyone makes mistakes. They don't make you a bad person or unworthy of love
- Imagine your negative thoughts as an 'inner critic', someone in your mind who focuses on self-doubt and things that haven't gone well. Notice when your inner critic is there and getting louder. Try to take a step back from these thoughts and consider how to move forward in a kind and helpful way. You might want to engage in some soothing activities or connect with the people or things that are important to you in your life. You might also want to try to bring to mind what a compassionate person in your life would say back to this inner critic, or how you would respond to a friend or family member you care about who was struggling with these thoughts.
- Remind yourself that there are reasons for behaving the way you do – you are not a 'bad' person, you are simply a human being

♦ **If you feel self-hatred**

- Try to notice what the part of you what is experiencing self hatred is thinking and then write a letter that counters this, giving yourself and the situation you are in as much compassion, understanding and acceptance as you can
- Find creative ways to express how you feel, like singing, poetry, dancing, painting or movement.
- Physical exercise like running or going to the gym can be a helpful way of expressing anger toward yourself.

Are there any more strategies that you can think of? Which one of these distractions above do you think could help you the most?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.❖ **Delaying self-harm**

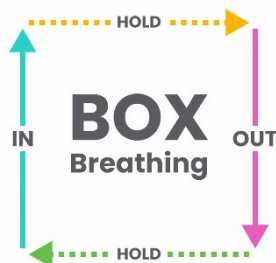
It may sound difficult, but waiting for five minutes before you self-harm can be another helpful technique. Don't be hard on yourself if you can't wait that long at first. Try to slowly increase your time and gradually build up the gaps between each time you self-harm.

What can I do to help myself in the future?

There are lots of ways to help yourself in the long term. The following suggestions may need you to look a bit deeper within yourself to explore the reasons why you self-harm. This can be difficult to do, but reflection and awareness can be very useful skills to learn for life, as well as helping you in this moment.

❖ Open up to your feelings

If you have been shamed or learned to push your feelings down, it can be scary to experience these feelings again. It is very brave to try facing them again. Allowing yourself to experience difficult emotions can be very painful and difficult, so try to do this slowly. Mindfulness tools such as a diary or controlled breathing techniques can be very useful in preventing you from feeling overwhelmed. There are more resources at the end of this booklet that you may find useful, which include mindfulness apps to help you find new ways to explore your feelings safely.



❖ Build your self-esteem

Learning to view yourself positively and with compassion and to value who you are makes a big difference. Try the following suggestions as ways to build your self-esteem for the long term:

- Regularly try to notice and write things down that you appreciate about yourself, no matter how small these may be. Using a diary or a journal can encourage you to be consistent with this.
- Build assertiveness skills and try to express what does and doesn't feel right for you and stick to these boundaries.
- Take control of your decisions. Remind yourself that you can make choices about your life and choose to do things that are enriching and supportive for you.

- Practice speaking kindly about yourself, as you would with someone that you love or think about how a close and trusted person would speak to you
- Try replacing mental urges to hurt yourself with thoughts that are positive or empowering - “Even though I want to hurt myself right now, I’m going to find another way to express how I am feeling.”

❖ Understand your self-harm in more detail

It can be very helpful to understand your relationship with self-harm in more depth, so that you can put things in place to support the process of stopping and find different ways of managing how you are feeling. Ask yourself the following questions to begin processing your understanding of your self-harm:

- How do I feel before and after I hurt myself?

- What was the reason why I started to hurt myself?

- What purpose does self-harm serve for me right now?

- What are the situations where I’m likely to hurt myself?

- What are my fears about living without self-harm?

- What would I miss about hurting myself?

- What else would be useful to understand about my self-harm?

❖ Look after yourself

Taking care of our bodies and general wellbeing can be a great way to make yourself feel better. By taking steps to take care of yourself more, you are actively practicing being kind to yourself.

- Do regular physical activity to boost your mood and reduce stress.
- Eat regular meals and try to maintain a healthy, balanced diet.
- Sleep hygiene is very important for good quality sleep – try maintaining a routine before bed that allows you to get enough sleep and wake up feeling rested.
- Do something creative to express your feelings, like writing, blogging, painting and drawing.
- Do more of what you enjoy – seeing friends, going for a walk, having dinner with your family. Try to make time for this every week, no matter what else you have got going on.

How do I reach out for support?

It can feel very daunting to reach out for help. Remind yourself that it is okay to ask for help, and that everyone needs support at different times for all types of reasons.

When you are ready to reach out, choose a person that you trust to talk about how you are feeling. This could be a family member, a friend, a teacher or healthcare provider like a GP. You may find it helpful to write down a list of useful contacts like people, organisations and websites that you can go to when you are finding things difficult. This will remind you that you are not alone, and where you can go to get support. If you feel ready to talk to someone, consider doing the following:

- Writing down how you feel when you are feeling calm, or just before or after you have self-harmed
- Practice what you want to say – this can be out loud, in a mirror, or you can take a voice-recording. If you have already told someone before, like a friend or a teacher, you can ask them to practice with you
- Think about what would be the best way to tell them – a letter, face-to-face, or a phone call

Once you have decided how you would like to tell them, think about what the conversation may be like:

- What you can say at the start – this is up to you and there is no ‘right’ way to begin, but saying something like “This is difficult for me to talk about, but I want to talk to you about something”, “Can we talk? I need your support with something” or “I’ve been hurting myself, because...”
- Think about how much you want to share. It can be overwhelming for yourself and the person you are confiding in to hear details of self-harm, but they may be able to hear more in later conversations that you have
- Explain what you need from them – would you like advice or someone to listen?
- Ask them to let you know if they need to tell someone else, so that you know what to expect and your privacy is respected

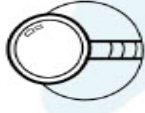





It is important to know that sometimes telling someone, like a parent or carer, may make them upset, confused or shocked. They may not fully understand you, but it is not your fault if they don’t react the way you wanted them to. You may need to wait until another time to discuss this with them again, or have another trusted person with you to talk to them. Let them know that you are telling them this because you trust them, and understand that this may be hard to hear. Take care of yourself after by doing something that you enjoy, and remember that you are **extremely brave** for seeking help.

Can you make a list of people, places websites and organisations that can support you? Who could you go to for emotional support, or for a friendly chat?

There is no quick-fix for self-harm, and making changes can take time and involve periods of difficulty. It is common to start making progress before going back to old behaviours. If you find that this is happening to you, practice kindness and compassion. You have not failed, it is simply a part of the process.

Making a Safety Plan

A safety plan is very important when identifying ways to look after yourself when going through a difficult time. Work through the safety plan attached below with a trusted adult or clinician and share with other important people to help them keep you safe too. You will also find guidance on the next page for your plan.

Name: _____ Date of birth: _____		Date completed: _____ Completed by: _____	
<h1>My Safety Plan</h1>			
S elf awareness:		F riendly people and places:	
A ction:		Y es! I can get through this:	
E motionally support:		T urn to helpful organisations:	
How can I keep myself safe now and in the future?			

My Safety Plan Guidance

1. Self-awareness:

Take a deep breath and try to identify what's troubling me right now. Remind myself that I have had these feelings in the past but that they have passed. Ask myself what has enabled me to cope in the past? Write them down.

2. Action:

When I start to notice the presence of these feelings, behaviours or thoughts I can try and do things that help me feel better and distract myself for at least 30 minutes e.g. have a bath, talk to a friend, listen to music, spend time in other people's company, exercise, read, watch TV, draw, dance, journal, relaxation, prayer, meditation, eat, shower, self-care... what else has helped in the past?

3. Friendly People and Places:

If I am not able to help myself feel better with the actions above, who can help me stay connected or distract me from the crisis? Is there a specific person or perhaps a place (store, cafe, restaurant, cinema, gym, place of worship, community centre etc.) that means I can be around people?

4. Emotional Support:

If the crisis is still not relieved or if I have persistent suicidal thoughts, who can I share these troubling feelings with and ask for emotional support?

5. Turn to Helpful Organisations:

If I have tried all of the steps above and continue to feel suicidal, which professionals will I turn to?

6. Yes I Can Get Through This:

Write down the things that inspire me to stay safe and alive. Remind myself that dark moods will pass and that I am worth the time and effort it takes to fill out, and follow, this Safety Plan.

7. How Can I Keep Myself Safe Now and In The Future?






Ask myself if there is anything I need to do to make my environment safer. Plan what steps you can take to make yourself safe. This may involve removing or securing any items that you are likely to use to hurt yourself, or going to another location until the urges have passed. It may also involve getting another person involved to help you.

Suggested Resources for Coping with Self-Harm







Please find below a list of resources that other children, young people and families have found useful in the past. We hope that you find these helpful.

Suggested Apps

Relaxation and mindfulness can be useful skills to develop to help children and young people manage their emotions, worrying thoughts, or the urge to self-harm. These can be practiced with the Smiling Mind, Headspace and Calm Harm apps.

App	Helpful for...
Smiling Mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: suitable for all ages • Provides different guided relaxation and mindfulness exercises • Free
Head Space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • Provides mindfulness exercises • Has a free trial
Calm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • Suitable for older children and teenagers • Provides relaxation exercises including a visual aid for controlled breathing techniques
Mindshift 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: older children and adolescents • MindShift™ CBT uses scientifically proven strategies based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to help you learn to relax and be mindful, and develop more effective ways of thinking to help you to manage worries you might experience. • Free
Calm Harm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age: Adolescents • Calm Harm was developed by a Clinical Psychologist using the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy called Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT). • The app is designed to help people resist or manage the urge to self-harm through different activities including: Comfort, Distract, Express Yourself, Release, Random, and Breathe. • Free

Websites and Supports

<p>Information and advice on self-harm from HandsOn:</p> <p>https://www.handsonscotland.co.uk/self-harm/</p>	
<p>NHS Inform website with information about how to get support for self-harm:</p> <p>https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/getting-help/</p>	
<p>Information and tips on self-care for young people:</p> <p>https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/</p>	
<p>Stress Control teaches skills to fight stress and boost your wellbeing:</p> <p>https://stresscontrol.org/stress-control</p>	
<p>Information about Shout, a text support service for people who are struggling to cope and need to talk:</p> <p>https://giveusashout.org/get-help/</p> <p>Shout is a free, confidential, and anonymous service run by trained volunteers and open 24/7.</p>	
<p>See this helpful resource from the National Self Harm Network for more tips and alternative coping strategies to self-harm:</p> <p>https://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads/Distractions.pdf</p>	

Images from Vecteezy.com

