

Self-harm

Information for
parents and carers

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SAMH
Scottish Action for Mental Health

WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is a common way of trying to deal with difficult feelings or emotions – in fact, 16 percent of 16-24 year olds have reported that they have self-harmed.

Finding out that the young person in your life is self-harming as a coping strategy can be alarming and hard to understand.

People self-harm in a wide range of ways, including cutting or burning themselves, pulling their hair, misusing alcohol or drugs, or engaging in risky behaviours.

However your child might be self-harming, it's really important to remember that self-harm is not attention-seeking – it is a coping method or a way of seeking help.

Why might my child be self-harming?

There are lots of different factors which can affect a young person's mental health, and which could lead to them self-harming – for example issues in their friendships or relationships; worries about school work or exams; problems fitting in; or bullying.

Self-harm might help them to cope with feelings of anger, sadness, shame, or fear. While suicide and self-harm are separate acts, self-harm might help them stay alive.

“My mood was so low that even a little setback caused me to feel worthless and I had an overwhelming urge to punish myself by self-harming because I thought I deserved this pain. I was a burden, a lost cause. Self-harm left me feeling worse and more of a failure, stuck with a critical voice in my head.”

– Alexandra

How can I recognise that my child might be self-harming?

There's no simple way of knowing that your child is self-harming, but there are a few things that you can keep an eye out for, including:

- Unexplained cuts, bruises, burns or clusters of marks
- Injuries on parts of the body opposite to the dominant hand
- Staying covered in hot weather or not wanting to do activities that require less clothing, e.g. swimming or sport
- Frequently wearing plasters or bandages
- Bald patches from hair pulling.
- A shift in mood from distressed to calm, following a period of being alone
- Increased signs of depression, anxiety, or isolation
- Excessive self blame, expressing feelings of hopelessness, uselessness and failure.

How should I respond if my child is self-harming?

If your child tells you that they're hurting themselves, or if you suspect that they are, it can be really difficult to know what to say and how to best approach the situation. You might feel shocked, angry, helpless, or responsible.

Try not to panic or over-react – the way you respond might have an impact on how they open up about their self-harm in the future.

Remember that self-harm is usually someone's way of managing very difficult emotions or experiences, and that it is different to suicidal feelings.

Your first priority is to make sure your child is safe, and assess their immediate risk. Find out if they're in pain, and if they need any medical attention.

You can work with your child to help them safety plan. Ask them to think about the following:

- What are the triggers that may make them want to self-harm?
- What can they do when they have an urge to self-harm?
- Who can they turn to if they have an urge to self-harm?
- What can they do to manage their mental health and wellbeing more generally?

“When I feel angry, I scream into my pillow, or sometimes I even punch it. It might sound a bit silly, but it really does help me without causing any harm.”

– Lara

Read **[Lara's blog](#)** on coping techniques.



You might not be able to stop your child from self-harming, but you can help them to make sure they're doing it as safely as possible. Here are some ways to do that:

- Avoid self-harming when they are tired, have been drinking alcohol, or taking sedating medication
- Try to avoid self-harming their wrists or areas with less flesh
- There is no safe way to overdose, so this should always be avoided.

Actively listening to your child is the most important thing you can do. You can make sure you are actively listening by:

- Using open and reassuring body language
- Giving them as much attention and focus as you can – if that isn't possible at the time, clarify this and arrange another time to talk when it is
- Summarise and repeat information back to them, to ensure clarity and highlight that you have been listening; this can also be a good way to check you understand what they're saying
- Ask open questions to allow them to elaborate and express themselves more fully
- Focus on gaining as much information as you can
- Ask open questions which start with what, when, where, who and how
- Try to avoid closed questions which can be answered with 'yes' or 'no'; and don't ask 'why' as this can come across as judgemental.

DO

- Be non-judgemental
- Let them know that you are there for them
- Have empathy and understanding about what they are doing
- Let them be in control of their decisions
- Offer to help them find support
- Remind them of their positive qualities and things they do well
- Have honest communications, where you take responsibility for any fears you have.

DON'T

- Try to force change
- Act or communicate in a way that threatens to take control away from them
- Either ignore their injuries, or overly focus on them
- Label self-harm as 'attention seeking'
- Tell them to stop – while this might be our natural instinct, by not allowing them to use this coping strategy they may decide to engage in riskier means to self-harm.

Although it often isn't, self-harm can sometimes be a person's way of asking for help. If so, it is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with needing help, and that deep distress can get in the way of someone's ability to be direct about what they need.

Some useful things to say are:

“I’m sorry that you’re feeling this way.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Thank you for talking to me about this – it took a lot of courage.”

“It won’t always feel like this.”

You can help your child to figure out how they feel before they self-harm, and then they can work out some distraction techniques for next time they feel like that. The following are suggestions of what might help; but note that these won't work for everyone, and it's important that they figure out what is best for them.

Anger and frustration

- Light exercise
- Hit or bite cushions
- Shout and dance
- Shake
- Bite on bunched up material
- Tear something into hundreds or pieces.

Sadness and fear

- Wrap yourself in a blanket
- Spend time with an animal
- Walk in nature
- Let yourself cry or sleep
- Listen to soothing music
- Try some breathing techniques.

Need to control

- Write lists
- Tidy or organise
- Write a letter about how you are feeling and then tear it up
- Weed a garden
- Clench then relax your muscles.

Numb and disconnected

- Flick an elastic band on your wrist
- Hold an ice cube
- Smell something with a strong odour
- Have a very cold shower.

Shame

- Stop spending time with anyone who treats you unkindly
- Recognise when you are trying to be perfect and accept that making mistakes is part of being human
- Remind yourself that there are reasons for how you behave – you are not a 'bad person'.

Self hatred or urge to punish yourself

- Write a letter from the part of you that feels bad, then write back with as much acceptance and compassion as you can
- Find creative ways to express how you feel, for example through music or art
- Exercise.

SIGNPOSTING

SAMH Information Service

Whether you're seeking support, are looking for more information for you or someone you love, or if you just want to have chat about mental health, we're here to help. Available: 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday.

T: 0344 800 0550

E: info@samh.org.uk

W: samh.org.uk/info

Samaritans

24-hour helpline offering emotional support for anyone feeling down, distressed or struggling to cope.

T: 116 123

E: jo@samaritans.org

W: samaritans.org

NHS 24

NHS24 is a 24-hour health service for Scotland.

T: 111

W: nhs24.scot

NSPCC Helpline

Provides 24/7 help and support from trained helpline counsellors to thousands of parents, professionals and families. Available: 24/7.

T: 0808 800 5000

E: help@nspcc.org.uk

W: nspcc.org.uk

Parentline

Children 1st Parentline is here for you and your family.

T: 08000 28 22 33

W: children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/

Childline

A free, private and confidential service for anyone under 19 in the UK. Available: 24 hours, 7 days a week.

T: 0800 1111

W: childline.org.uk

Youngminds

Information and resources for young people and parents on mental health. Available: Mon to Fri 9:30am - 4pm.

T: 0808 802 5544

W: youngminds.org.uk

National Self-harm Network

Offering support, advice and advocacy services to people affected by self-harm via online support forums.

W: nshn.co.uk

Shout

Shout 85258 is the UK's first free, confidential, 24/7 text support service. It's a place to go if you're struggling to cope and need mental health support.

T: Text 85258

W: giveusashout.org

Calm Harm App

Calm Harm is a free app that helps you manage or resist the urge to self-harm.

W: calmharm.stem4.org.uk

Breathing Space

A confidential out of office hours telephone line for people over 16 experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

T: 0800 83 85 87

W: breathingspace.scot

SAMH is Scotland's mental health charity and is dedicated to mental health and wellbeing for all. We are here to provide help, information and support to people affected by mental health problems.

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