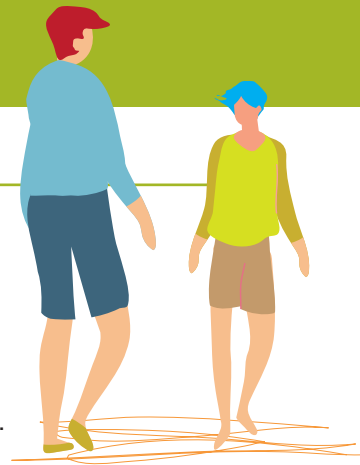


Young people who are self-harming

How to talk, listen, protect, and offer support



For some young people, self harm is a one-off event. For others it can happen more than once and may become a behaviour pattern that is difficult to change.

What is self harm?

Self harm is when someone deliberately hurts themselves physically.

This can include:

- Cutting (eg. skin on arms, wrists, thighs, stomach)
- Hitting oneself
- Burning the skin
- Deliberately overdosing on medications or drugs
- Deliberately crushing body parts

Why do young people self harm?

1. Young people may self harm to manage or control intense and uncomfortable feelings, thoughts or memories. They may not have any other ways to cope with these on their own or feel that they can tell anyone else. Young people report feeling numb, overwhelmed, alone or angry, and say that self harm “grounds” them. It shifts the focus away from the trigger of their emotional pain.
2. It may be a way of telling others about their distress and an indirect way of asking for help.
3. It may be a symptom of a mental health issue, like depression.

Anyone may self-harm but young people are at a higher risk of doing so if they have experienced abuse (physical, emotional or sexual) or if they have an existing mental health issue like depression.

Usually self-harm is not triggered by one incident- it is generally used as an unhelpful way to cope with a build-up of stressors. Self-harm may provide relief in the moment, but young people need to find more helpful ways of coping and caregivers can support them in doing so.

Some triggers may include:

- Relationship issues with friends or family
- Alcohol and other drug use
- Problems at school
- Bullying
- Low self-esteem
- Mental health issues such as anxiety or depression

How to know if your child is self harming:

Self-harm may not be easy to recognise.

You may notice:

- changes in your child's behaviour or mood
- changes to how/where they spend their time, and who they socialise with.
- wearing clothing that's inappropriate for the weather / occasion e.g. long sleeve jumpers / hoodies in summer, long pants all the time.
- cuts, bruises or marks that the young person can't easily explain.

The only way to really know if your child is self-harming is to talk to them about it.

What to do if your child is self harming:

Find a time and space that is private, free from distractions and not straight after a stressful life event. It's OK to not know exactly what to say. Begin by talking about what you have noticed (be specific) and why this is worrying you.

Ask directly about self harm. *Are you hurting yourself? Are you self-harming?*

If they answer no, reassure them that they can talk to you about distressing thoughts or feelings and you will support them and you will work through things together. If you are still concerned, ask directly about suicidal thoughts. Refer to our Parent Tip Sheet: Children with Suicidal Thoughts.

If they answer yes, reassure them that you're glad they told you, and that you will support them and work through it together. Try to get a whole picture of the behaviour: how often and what method/s, what their triggers may be.

If they are not prepared to talk to you right then, don't take it personally. Reassure them that you are ready to listen when they are ready to talk. Offer other places they could go for support (other family members, school counsellor, GP).

Managing your reactions:

It's OK not to know exactly what to say if your child is self-harming. You don't have to be perfect. You may react with anger, denial, guilt, fear, helplessness, disbelief- giving you an insight into the intensity of what your child may be feeling. It is important to work through these feelings, perhaps by talking with someone else first so that you focus on what your child needs at that moment.

Talk, listen, support:

Identify what your child wants support with. It may be that you are there for practical support. If they don't want to talk to you about their self-harm, who will they talk to instead?

Help your child identify what their triggers may be right before they think about self-harming.

Encourage positive coping strategies for managing stress:

- Eat well, sleep, exercise
- Spend time with family/friends
- Create a positive home and school environment
- Limit alcohol and other drug use

Help your child stay safe:

Directly help, or encourage the young person to treat their wounds appropriately (disinfect, wash, dress).

Understand your limits. The priority is your child's safety, and sometimes you may need to call 000, a doctor or other services for support even if your child doesn't want you to.

Ask directly about suicide if you are concerned.

If it is a medical emergency, always call 000.

The 3 D's:

DO something else

DELAY the urge to self harm/put barrier between young person and method of harm

DISTRACT eg. with colouring, drawing, stress balls etc

Other things to encourage instead of self-harming:

Wait 15 minutes and see if the thoughts and feelings reduce in intensity

- Draw, paint
- Read or journal
- Go for a walk with you or someone else they trust
- Exercise
- Distract themselves with something they enjoy (limit social media use when in distress)



Myth busting:

Myth: Children and young people who are self-harming are always contemplating suicide.

Fact: While there is an overlap between them, self-harm is also referred to as non-suicidal self injury and people who self-harm may never think about suicide. Likewise, people who think about suicide may never self-harm. However, self harming can lead to accidental death or serious injury. Also, repeated self-harm may lead young people to feel helpless and trapped, which may lead to suicidal thoughts.

Myth: Someone who has self harmed will always self harm.

Fact: Whilst recovery from repeated self-harming may take time, it is possible for young people to stop with appropriate support.

Myth: Only teenage girls self-harm.

Fact: People of all ages and genders may self-harm.

Myth: If my child doesn't have marks on their wrists, they aren't self-harming.

Fact: Self harm is not only cutting on the wrists. It may be cutting on other areas of the body, burning, hitting or deliberately overdosing on medications or drugs. Talk to your child if you notice a change in their behaviour.

Myth: Only people with depression self-harm.

Fact: Self-harm is used as a way to cope with uncomfortable feelings. We all experience these, so therefore people without depression may self-harm.