

self-harm

Information for Parents

“ *If your child self-harms they need your love and support to get over it. Don't over react when they tell you about it, your opinion is probably more important than anyone else's to them.* ”

- Young person

If you have recently found out that your child is self harming you may feel unsure what to do next and how to help your child. This leaflet aims to explain a little about self harm, why people do it, and what you can do to help, as well as giving you some further information about help that is available both for your child and for you as a parent.

“ *I feel the urge when I have too much feeling inside me, whether anger, sadness or frustration, that I can't seem to contain it inside my mind. I think self-harming was my way of dealing with it.* ”

- Young person



WHAT IS SELF INJURY AND SELF-HARM

It can be confusing and extremely difficult to find out that your child is hurting themselves on purpose. Self injury/harm is a way of expressing emotions and distress when it's too hard to put them into words or deal with them in any other way. It can also be addictive and isn't something a person can quickly or easily stop doing; recovering from self harming can be a difficult process and involves dealing with the issues that have caused the self harm. The self harm is a symptom of the underlying problem that your child is experiencing.

Self-injury means deliberately causing physical harm to your body including things like cutting, burning, banging and bruising and non suicidal overdoses.

Self-harm is a continuum of damaging behaviours. At one end are socially acceptable, familiar yet unhealthy behaviours such as nail biting, comfort eating etc. and at the other are behaviours such as alcohol/drug misuse, eating disorders, and self-injury.

Some Reasons Why People Self-Injure:

- Problems at home or school
- Feelings of stress/pressure
- Low self esteem
- Perfectionism
- Mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety)
- Sexual and/or physical and emotional abuse

Functions of Self-Harm

Include:

- Relief of feelings
- Distraction
- Control
- Self-punishing
- Cleansing
- Communication
- Comfort and Nurturing
- Feeling real or alive
- Making self unattractive

Physical pain is often easier to deal with than emotional pain and can release chemicals in the brain that soothe, however this doesn't last long and the person will feel 'low' later, with feelings of guilt or low self worth which feed into the harming cycle. It is temporary relief that does not address the underlying issue.

Self-harm can become a natural response to the stresses of everyday life.

If you suspect your child may have been self-harming for a while, try not to blame yourself for not noticing. People who self-harm can be very successful at hiding the signs by harming themselves in areas of their bodies that aren't visible, by dressing to conceal injuries, and will usually self-harm in secret at times/places where they are confident they won't be seen.

It is difficult to say how many young people are self-harming. This is because very few teenagers tell anyone what's going on, so it's incredibly difficult to keep records or have an accurate idea of scale. It is thought that around 13% of young people may try to hurt themselves on purpose at some point between the ages of 11 and 16, but the actual figure could be much higher. Girls are thought to be more likely to self-harm than boys, but this could be because boys are more likely to engage in behaviours such as punching a wall, which aren't always recognised as self-harm

or don't come to the attention of hospitals.

SUICIDE OR SERIOUS INJURY

Self-harm is sometimes thought to be directly linked with suicide but this isn't the case. The two are actually very different. Suicide is a way of ending life whereas self-harm is a way of coping with life. You may be worried that your child will accidentally hurt themselves more seriously than they intend. Although this is possible, experts say most self-harmers know exactly what they are doing and how far they need to go to find release/relief from their problems.

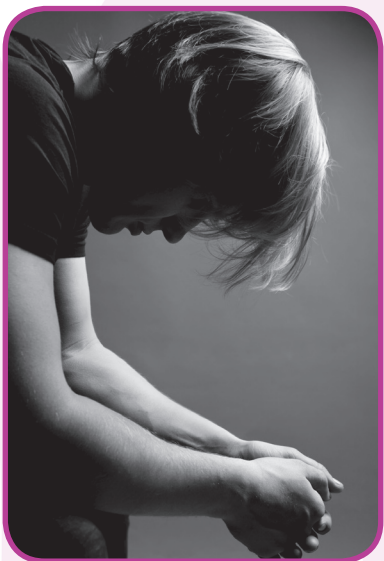
While the majority of scratches and bruises can be dealt with using basic first aid, in the case of serious injuries or anything to do with heat/medicines medical care should be sought.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

“ *It's important that however bad parents think things are, they are hopeful of change. Believe and keep believing in your child's capacity to overcome it. Then they'll feel that too. That sounds clichéd but it makes a big difference. The biggest thing that people who self harm say they want to hear is 'it'll be ok.* ”

- (www.familylives.org.uk)



Although this may be against your instincts as a parent to protect your child, don't ask your child to stop self-harming – you may be trying to remove the only coping mechanism they

have at that time. If you try to prevent them from self-harming this can just drive their behaviour underground and make them less likely to talk about it and seek help. Trying to remove their coping mechanism can also make them feel powerless and out of control which may make their desire to harm themselves worse.

As self-harm is a coping strategy it is not the goal of treatment to prevent it but deal with the reasons for it. In the mean time alternative coping strategies are explored and harm reduction emphasised. In discussion with your child you may decide to seek this kind of help via your GP or other routes available.

This doesn't mean you are ignoring what is happening, and there are many positive things you can do to help your child recover, keep talking to you, and work towards seeking further help together.

- Be cautious when talking to your child about self harm, don't push them too hard and really listen without judging if they do choose to open up

to you. If you are concerned but your child feels they can't talk to you, help them find someone they can talk things through with.

- Try to avoid responding with anger or frustration. Try to stay calm and non-judgemental at all times.
- You may need to tell other people about your child's self-harm to get support, but try to only tell people who need to know and let your child know before you do this to avoid embarrassing or isolating your child. Respect their right to privacy.
- When/if they do discuss their self-harm with you be compassionate and respect what your child is telling you, even though you may not understand or find it difficult to accept what they are doing.
- Try not to show if you think your child's reasons for being upset are not valid. Even if you feel the problems they are talking about are easily solved don't dismiss or trivialise their worries.
- Do not push your child into showing you their scars and/or injuries. Be there for your child should they decide to show them to you and try to demonstrate sensitivity by avoiding showing upset or disgust and remain calm.
- Don't push them to tell you why they self-harm.
- Try not to make them feel guilty about the effect it is having on you or on others e.g. by saying things like 'I am very worried about you'; 'please stop for me'
- Try to let them know you want them to be supported – ask your child what you can do to help e.g. 'I want to help, how can I do that?'
- When you are talking to your child about their problems try to focus on their feelings and how they are, not whether or not they have or want to self-harm.
- Reassure your child that you love them unconditionally and that you are there to help them in any way you can.



If your child hasn't spoken to you but you are concerned they are hurting themselves there are places you can go for help and advice about how to handle the situation. This can be a very overwhelming situation to deal with as a parent;

**make sure you acknowledge your own
needs and get support
when you need it.**

WHERE TO FIND HELP

YOUNGMINDS

The voice for young people's mental health and wellbeing

Free, confidential online and telephone support, including information and advice, to any adult worried about the emotional problems, behaviour or mental health of a child or young person up to the age of 25.

TEL 0808 802 5544

(free for mobiles and landlines) Monday to Friday 9.30am-4pm

EMAIL parents@youngminds.org.uk

and we will respond to your query within 3 working days.



A mental health charity offering advice and support about various aspects of mental health

www.mind.org.uk

Info line **0300 123 3393**

available weekdays 9am-6pm

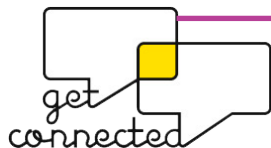
SAMARITANS

Confidential 24 hour support

www.samaritans.org

24/7 talk line, **08457 90 90 90**

24/7 text line, **077 25 90 90 90**



Is a national helpline providing free confidential help for young people under 25

www.getconnected.org.uk

TEL 0808 808 4994

between 1pm and 11pm daily

Text 80849

Email (via website)

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/GetConnectedUK>

Webchat between 1pm and 11pm daily

FAMILY LIVES

Is a national family support charity giving information and support about all aspects of family life, including issues such as self-harm.

<http://www.familylives.org.uk/>

TEL 0808 800 2222

Email (via website)

