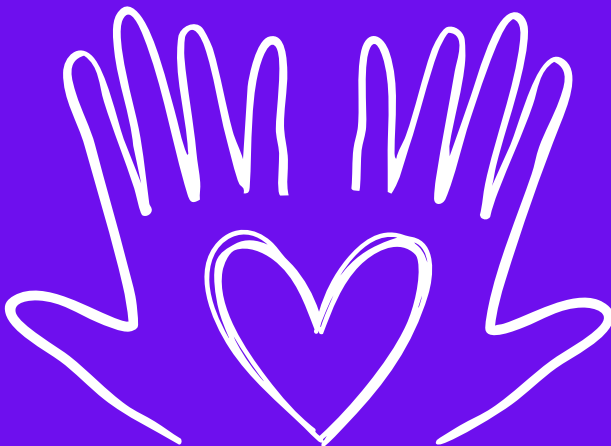




# The **truth** about **self-harm**

For **young people**  
and **their friends** and **families**



The information in this booklet is based on the findings of the National Inquiry into self-harm among young people. The inquiry was carried out by two charities: The Mental Health Foundation and The Camelot Foundation.

The inquiry panel heard evidence from many hundreds of people including young people who self-harm or have self-harmed in the past, and those who work with or care about them. This booklet is based on what they said.

For more information about the National Inquiry, and a full list of contributors, see the Truth Hurts report at **[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)**

This booklet has been updated according to recent research up to 2025.

## **Acknowledgements**

Updated in 2025 by Dr Nina Lutz.

Previously updated by: Una Foye, Lauren Chakkalackal, Josefien Breedvelt & Iris Elliott.

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Special thanks to Dr Pooky Knightsmith and Dr Maggie Long for their advice and guidance.

Self-harm can affect anyone, the photos used in this publication were chosen to represent some of the ways that people look after their mental health.

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# Introduction

This booklet aims to help you understand more about self-harm and what to do if you are worried about yourself or someone else. It explains what self-harm is, what to do if you or someone you know is self-harming, and how to get help.

Self-harm is very common and affects more people than you might think.

This means that it's likely that at least one in five young people in every secondary school classroom have self-harmed at some time. If you are self-harming, you are not alone – lots of information and support are available.

**Around 20%**  
**of young people**  
**have self-harmed.<sup>1</sup>**

## Remember...

**Self-harm isn't a suicide attempt or a cry for attention.**

There is a link between suicidal thoughts and self-harm, but most people who hurt themselves don't want to die.

It's often a way for them to cope with overwhelming and distressing thoughts or feelings. However, whatever the reason behind it, self-harm should be taken seriously.

If you self-harm, it's important to know that you won't always feel the way you do now. It is possible to cope and thrive without it.

With the right help and support, most people who self-harm can and do fully recover.



Additionally, while self-harm and self-damaging behaviours, such as eating disorders, substance use and risk-taking are often the results of underlying distress, the motivation behind them can vary – as can how they're treated.

If you or someone you know self-harms, there are support options for managing the underlying reasons why someone hurts themselves.

## The self-harm cycle

Self-harm usually starts as a way to relieve the build-up of pressure from distressing thoughts and feelings. Yet this relief is short-lived, and soon after, feelings of shame and guilt often follow, which can continue the cycle of self-harm. Understanding this cycle can help you identify triggers and break patterns of behaviour.

As self-harm can provide temporary relief, it can become someone's normal way of dealing with life's difficulties.

However, using self-harm as a way to cope can make problems worse as it doesn't address the underlying reasons, leads to secrecy, damages self-esteem, and can become worse over time. This means it's important to talk to someone as early as possible to get the right support and help.

Learning new coping strategies to deal with these difficulties can make it easier to break the cycle of self-harm in the long run.



# Who self-harms?

There is no such thing as a typical person who self-harms. **Self-harm is something that can affect anyone.** If you self-harm, it can help to know that you're not alone. Around 20% of young people self-harm, so a lot of people understand what you're going through.

## Most young people say that they started to hurt themselves between the ages of 12 and 16.<sup>1</sup>

While it's true that anyone can be affected by self-harm, some people may be more likely to hurt themselves because of their past experiences.

### Some factors that could make someone more at risk of self-harming include:

- ✎ Early life difficulties, such as experiencing or witnessing violence or abuse<sup>2</sup>
- ✎ Being bullied or bullying other people<sup>3</sup>
- ✎ Living in care (not with their parents) or being care-experienced<sup>5</sup>
- ✎ Involvement with the criminal justice system<sup>6</sup>
- ✎ Trauma, such as the loss of a loved one or the end of an important relationship<sup>2</sup>
- ✎ Experience of a mental health disorder.<sup>4</sup> This might include depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, and eating disorders
- ✎ Identifying as LGBTQIA+ and experiencing identity-related stigma or discrimination. However, it's good to note that connection to the LGBTQIA+ community can actually reduce the chance that a young person will self-harm, showing the importance of acceptance and social support.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to remember that although these are risk factors that can make someone more likely to self-harm, having any of these does not mean someone will self-harm. Similarly, someone who self-harms might not experience any of these.

# Why do people self-harm?

Everyone has different things that cause stress and worry. Some people can manage these difficulties by talking to friends and family, while others may find expressing how they feel too overwhelming. Yet when we don't express our emotions and talk about the things that make us distressed, angry or upset, the pressure can build up and become unbearable.

People who self-harm may turn this pressure in on themselves and use their bodies as a way to express the feelings they can't say out loud.<sup>8</sup> You might find that the urge to hurt yourself comes when you are feeling angry, distressed, worried, or depressed.

One person's reasons for self-harming might be different from another's. However, some of the things young people reported as triggers to self-harm include<sup>8</sup>:

- difficulties at home
- arguments or problems with friends
- school pressures
- bullying
- depression
- anxiety
- low self-esteem
- dissociation (feeling numb, 'unreal', or disconnected from your body)
- transitions and changes, such as changing schools

One of these issues can feel overwhelming by itself, let alone when a few of them come together. When this happens, it can become too much for one person to deal with. As one young person said, many people self-harm to **'get out the hurt, anger and pain'** caused by pressures in their lives. This suggests that they don't feel like they have other ways of coping with these overwhelming feelings.<sup>8</sup>

Talking to someone you trust or a healthcare professional can help you find other options for coping with what you are feeling.

As a note, some people who self-harm also use alcohol and drugs as a way to cope with distressing emotions. Self-harming while under the influence can be especially dangerous as it can lead to more severe injuries than intended. Alcohol and drug use can also add to feelings of guilt and shame, potentially leading to further self-harm and continuing the cycle.<sup>8</sup>

# Breaking down self-harm myths

There are lots of myths attached to self-harm. This isn't surprising – myths and misunderstandings often arise when a problem like self-harm is poorly understood. However, these myths often lead to negative stereotypes.

Negative stereotypes can be powerful. They need to be challenged because they stop people talking about their issues and asking for help. These myths also mean that professionals, family and friends can misunderstand people who self-harm.

## 1 MYTH

### 'Self-harm is attention-seeking'

Self-harm is not attention-seeking. Many people who self-harm don't talk to anyone about what they are going through for a long time, and it can be very hard for them to find enough courage to ask for help.

## 2 MYTH

### 'Certain types of people self-harm'

Self-harm has been stereotyped to be seen as part of certain youth subcultures. There is little to no evidence to suggest that self-harm is part of any particular group or subculture. People from all different backgrounds and interests can self-harm.

3

MYTH

## **‘Only girls self-harm’**

It is often assumed that girls are more likely than boys to self-harm. However, self-harm behaviours are present in all gender groups, and the stereotype that ‘only girls self-harm’ can make it more difficult for boys to get in touch for help.

4

MYTH

## **‘People who self-harm must enjoy it’**

Self-harm is not about seeking pleasure, but instead about releasing emotional distress. While the experience of pain can differ from person to person, harming behaviours can still cause intense pain. Some people might describe this pain as an escape from ‘numbness’ and a reminder that they’re alive. Others may report it as a form of punishment. There is no singular way to describe the pain experienced during self-harming.<sup>9</sup>

5

MYTH

## **‘People who self-harm are suicidal’**

It’s important to understand that many people who self-harm are not suicidal. Self-harm has even been described by some as a means of staying alive and surviving difficult times. However, the difficulties that lead to and are caused by self-harming can be linked to suicidal thoughts, which is why they must always be taken seriously.

  **People often link self-harm to suicide but for me, it was something very different; it was my alternative to suicide, my way of coping even though sometimes I wished that my world would end.**  

# Getting help

## Should I tell someone?

**Yes.** Talking to someone is often the first step to breaking the cycle of self-harm.

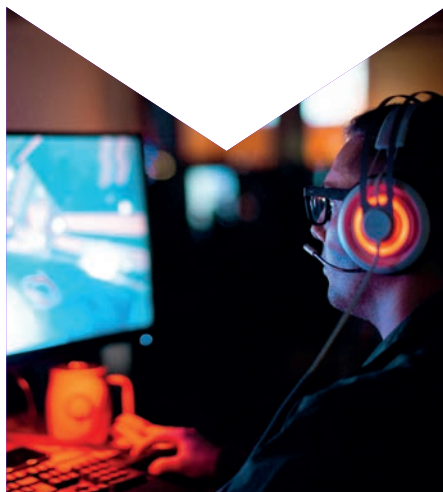
Speaking to someone about what you're going through can be a healthy way of coping – it allows you to share the problem you've been carrying alone. Plus, feeling listened to can help lighten the burden.

Talking to someone about your self-harm and the reasons behind it might not be easy. This is normal – lots of young people who hurt themselves find asking for help very difficult. But it is an important step towards recovery and feeling better.

**Telling someone about your self-harm shows strength and courage; it can often be a huge relief to be able to let go of such a secret, or at least share it.**

Don't be afraid to ask for help whenever and however you need to. Talking about your feelings is a sign of strength. It shows that you are taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what you need to stay healthy.

And remember, there's a double benefit to speaking to someone about what you're going through; while you will benefit, it might also encourage others to do the same.



## Who can I talk to?

There are lots of support options available if you want to talk about what you are going through.

Some options young people said they feel able to talk to are:

- ✱ friends
- ✱ family
- ✱ someone at school, such as a trusted teacher, school nurse or pastoral care staff
- ✱ a youth worker
- ✱ their GP or healthcare professionals such as a counsellor or nurse
- ✱ charities and helplines (some of which are listed in the section 'Further help, information, and support').



## How to talk to someone you trust

There are no rules about how you should tell someone. The most important thing is that you feel comfortable with and trust the person you decide to tell – you need to be able to openly discuss how you're feeling.

Speaking to someone about your self-harm can be difficult, so you could follow these steps to help make it easier:

- 1** Set time aside to talk to them. Remember, you can set the pace, and it is up to you how much you want to tell them.
- 2** Let them know how you're feeling and that you need their support.
- 3** Concentrate on the thoughts and emotions behind your feelings rather than the actions. You don't need to give details about how you harmed yourself or talk about things that make you feel uncomfortable.

If you don't know how to start expressing how you feel, try to think of a word to describe your emotions – think of as many as you need to illustrate how you feel.

You can even write down what you want to say on a piece of paper and read it out loud. Also, if you find speaking about your self-harm face to face too difficult, you could tell the person in an email. You could even ask a friend to speak to a trusted adult on your behalf.

**Sometimes after telling someone you may feel worse. That's normal. But remember that once you get over this hurdle there is support and help available.**

Don't let the fear of a bad reaction put you off seeking the help you need and deserve. If you're worried that someone won't understand, or you've

experienced this in the past, you could give them a copy of this booklet, suggest they speak to an expert in the field, or give them a helpline number – such as **Family Lives 0808 800 2222** – to help them understand.

Also, remember that health professionals, GPs and teachers are familiar with this issue and are there to help. If you decide to talk to a GP or other health professional, you can take a friend or family member with you for support.

As hard as it might be to tell someone about your self-harm, sharing can take the pressure off and help you get the right support and help.

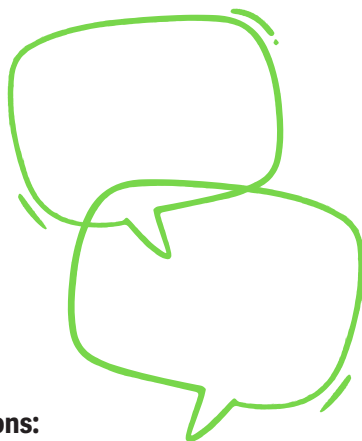
**The following are examples of things you could say to someone if you want to open up about your self-harm but don't know how to start:**

- ✶ “I need to talk to you about something I've been struggling with. It's really difficult to say, but I need your support.”
- ✶ “I've been going through a tough time, and I've found myself dealing with things in ways that I'm not happy about. I want to talk to you about it because I trust you.”
- ✶ “Lately, I've been feeling really overwhelmed, and I've been dealing with it by hurting myself. I think I need help to get through this.”

# What help is available to me?

When you feel ready to seek help, there are lots of support services and treatments available.

If you choose to speak with your GP, they will likely offer you counselling, where a professional will listen to you about your problems and help you work on creating solutions and ways to cope.



**Your GP may give you the following talk therapy options:**



## Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT has been proven to be very effective in helping to reduce self-harm. A therapist trained in CBT can help you recognise how your thoughts, feelings, and actions are all linked and concentrate on building coping strategies and problem-solving skills.

## Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)

DBT was adapted from CBT for people who struggle with strong or difficult emotions. It has been shown to reduce self-harm by teaching practical ways of managing emotions and stress.<sup>10</sup>



## Psychodynamic therapy

This form of talk therapy concentrates on the underlying issues behind self-harm. By helping you understand where your thoughts and feelings come from, you can start to process them and reduce self-harm.



If you decide that therapy is the right course of action, it's important that you talk to your GP or a trusted health professional who can guide you on the best treatment option for you.

There are also a number of charities and self-help groups throughout the UK that can support you through this time. People who self-harm have said that it can be helpful and supportive to hear from other young people who have also experienced self-harm. More information about these sources of support is available at the end of this booklet.

 **I feel a lot more confident. I've learned to be more open about my feelings and been able to move on. I felt that, without them knowing, I was being held back. I've been able to come out of myself and explain what I do, and make sense of it, not keep having to lie and cover up what I did. I no longer feel ashamed as I know people are supporting me.** 



# Recovery

You won't always feel the way you do now. Better days are ahead, even if it's hard to see them. The problems that are causing you to self-harm can, with help and support, become more manageable over time or even go away.<sup>11,12</sup>

Some young people who have recovered from self-harm say that changes in circumstances over time (for example, moving home, finishing exams, going to university, and changing jobs, schools, or financial circumstances) helped them to recover.

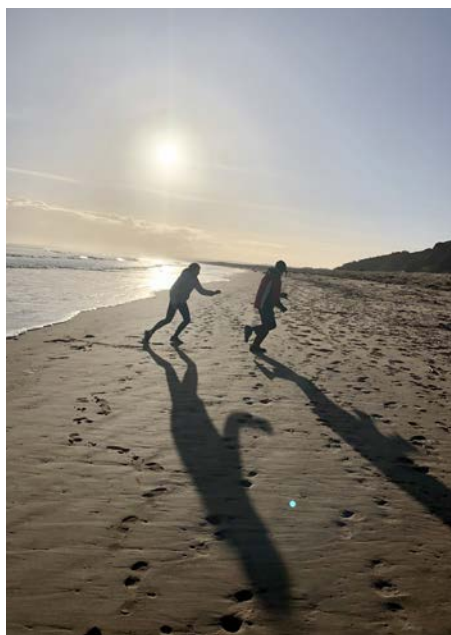
In other words, once one or two of the main factors that were causing them to self-harm were removed, they felt they no longer needed to use self-harm as a coping strategy.

**Take time and be patient with yourself. Recovery doesn't happen overnight – it can be a slow process. Start to learn how to care for yourself.**



Others explained that recovery was about finding new coping strategies and more helpful ways of dealing with emotions or distress – an important factor in recovery from self-harm. We discuss some ways to do this in the section on ‘Tips for looking after yourself.’

It dawned on me that continually harming myself was not allowing me to grow; it was just proving that I was still here and I could feel. But wasn't letting me push things forward, and unless I stopped doing that, I would be in the same situation forever.



## How can I stop harming myself?

A big part of recovery is trusting people enough to let them help you. Talking to someone can help you figure out why you self-harm and new ways to cope with difficulties. You don't have to deal with this on your own.

Finding out what makes you happy, sad, angry, isolated, vulnerable or strong can help you develop ways other than self-harm of dealing with negative feelings. Counselling is a good way of exploring these thoughts and emotions and is available through your GP.

Other young people who have self-harmed have found 'distraction techniques' to be a very useful strategy for reducing or stopping self-harming. These techniques help find a release for emotional pressure without needing to turn to harm. We discuss some popular distraction techniques below.

If you feel the need to harm yourself, try to give yourself a goal of getting through the next ten minutes without doing so.

# Distraction techniques

When you feel the urge to self-harm, distraction techniques can be a useful way to 'ride the wave' of emotion and overcome the urge.

## Young people shared their most helpful distraction techniques with us:

- ✎ Write down thoughts and feelings that are distressing you; crumple the page up, rip it apart and throw it out as a way to let go of that thought.
- ✎ Get some play-dough; stretch it or squeeze it to relieve tension.
- ✎ Have a good scream into a pillow or cushion.
- ✎ Take a minute pause to breathe or meditate.
- ✎ Make lots of noise, either with a musical instrument or by banging on pots and pans.
- ✎ Talk to someone about what is triggering you, or seek help from a professional.
- ✎ Call a friend or family member and talk to them. The conversation doesn't have to be about self-harm.
- ✎ Go for a walk to take yourself away from triggers. Being in nature or a public place gives you the time and space to reduce the urge to hurt yourself.
- ✎ Do something creative: Make a collage of colours to represent your mood or to remind you of your favourite things.
- ✎ Listen to music you like or watch a film you enjoy.
- ✎ Go online and visit self-help websites.

 **I've tried so many distraction techniques – from writing down my thoughts, hitting a pillow, listening to music, writing down pros and cons. But the most helpful to my recovery was the five-minute rule, where if you feel like you want to self-harm, you wait for five minutes before you do it, then see if you can go another five minutes, and so on till eventually the feeling that you need to is over.** 

# Tips for looking after yourself



## Keeping safe

If you are self-harming, it can be difficult to stop, especially when you feel distressed or upset. If you don't feel you can stop right now, it is important that you keep yourself safe.

Wounds and injuries of any type can be dangerous and carry the risk of serious infection, so they need to be looked after.

If you have a serious injury, feel unwell or might be going into shock (fast breathing, racing heart, feeling faint or panicked) you should **seek help immediately**.

If you find yourself in this situation, seek a trusted adult or friend who can get you the medical attention you need. This doesn't mean you have to discuss your self-harm with them (although it may help); it is about allowing someone to support you medically in a moment of crisis.

## Talk to someone

When you feel overwhelmed, talk to a friend, family member or trusted adult. It can relieve a lot of pressure to let someone know what you are thinking and feeling. Remember, you can use a list of words that describe how you feel or write out what you want to say to help you get started.

Knowing who you can talk to in times of crisis makes it easier to ask for help when you need it. Who can you speak to during the night? On weekends? When you are at school? Make a list of people and helplines you want to call and keep it somewhere safe.

Even looking at this list can be a reminder that you are not alone; there are people you can talk to when you need to.



## Make a 'safe box'

You can create a safe box to help you through times when you feel overwhelmed by emotion and have the urge to harm yourself. To help you get through these feelings, fill your safe box with things that make you happy and calm.

Although these things are unique to everyone, some suggestions include:

- your list of people you can speak to when you need to.
- activities such as a colouring book or pages.
- your favourite book, music playlist or movie.
- sensory objects, such as items with a strong smell or unusual texture.
- a list of things to do that calm you when you feel upset or triggered.
- a list of statements or reminders about yourself, such as 'My feelings are important, but I don't have to act on them,' or 'It's okay to feel overwhelmed. I've gotten through it in the past.'

We include more information on how to create a 'safe box' at the end of this section.

## Do something you enjoy

Remember that there is more to you than self-harm. Do things that remind you of this and make you happy. Perhaps a sport you enjoy or a creative hobby such as writing.

Answers to questions such as the following can help you figure out what activities, places, or people make you feel content and safe:

- What makes me feel most energised?
- When do I feel most calm or joyful?
- What makes me feel most connected to others?
- Who do I feel like the best version of myself around?
- What activity have I always wanted to try?

Doing things you enjoy helps you look after your mental health, improves your self-esteem, and reminds you that you are important and have value.

Aim to do at least one thing that makes you feel happy every day – no matter how small.

## Delay



If resisting the urge to hurt yourself feels too much, try to delay it. For example, if you feel an urge, set a timer for 10 minutes and use this time to engage in an activity that makes you feel good.

Over time, try to keep increasing the amount of time you're delaying your urge to self-harm – eventually, you may even feel capable of entirely resisting it.

## Surf the urge

'Urge Surfing' is a mindfulness technique that can help you manage your need to self-harm. The trick is to accept the thoughts associated with the urge without acting on it. Like a wave, if you allow yourself to surf the urge, it will eventually lose strength. When you feel an urge, try to:

1

**Observe it:** Close your eyes and try to identify where in your body you're feeling the urge. Is it in your stomach, hands, or legs? Try to describe it in non-judgemental ways; does it have a certain feeling, like being hot or cold? Does it take over a large space in your body, or is it small? Does it have a colour?

2

**Accept it:** Accept that you're experiencing the urge – and that this is okay. Experience the urge and what it feels like without acting on it. If you're worried that allowing yourself to experience the urge will lead you to act on it, think of a time when you successfully didn't and how you managed not to.

3

**Notice your breathing:**

You don't have to change your breathing, just notice the rise and fall of your chest as you breathe in and out.

4

**Bring your attention back to your body:** How does the area of your body where you felt the urge feel now? If the urge starts to increase, concentrate on your breathing again. Try to send kind words to where you feel it. Spend at least a minute on this step, but longer is better. Once you're done, congratulate yourself for surfing the urge!



## Don't be too hard on yourself

Many young people who self-harm can be perfectionists and high achievers. You might put pressure on yourself to do things in a certain way or feel that nothing you do is good enough. Try not to be so hard on yourself about not getting things perfect. Recovery is about knowing that it is okay for your work or performance to be 'good enough'.



**Remind yourself that it's okay not to be perfect with statements like:**

- 'Trying, and getting it wrong, is better than not trying at all. Making progress matters more than perfection.'
- 'Achieving something matters, but it doesn't define my value or who I am as a person.'
- 'My happiness doesn't depend on getting everything right. I can find joy in the moment, regardless of what the outcomes are.'

# Avoid alcohol and drugs

It's very common for people to drink or take drugs when they feel overwhelmed or when they want to avoid their feelings. But, like self-harm, the effects of alcohol and drugs are temporary and can make you feel even worse when they wear off.

When the effects of alcohol and drugs wear off, the brain has to adjust, and we might worry about things we said or did when drinking.

We might also feel dehydrated, tired, and have low blood sugar – all of which can lead to feelings of depression and anxiety. Substances can also lower your inhibitions, which can lead to more urges to hurt yourself.

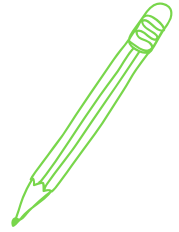
Our publication on [how to manage and reduce stress](#) offers healthy ways of coping with negative feelings. You can also visit [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) for more information.

**Many people stop hurting themselves when the time is right for them. Everyone is different and if they feel the need to self-harm at the moment, they shouldn't feel guilty about it – it is a way of surviving, and doing it now does NOT mean that they will need to do it forever. It is a huge step towards stopping when they begin to talk about it, because it means that they are starting to think about what might take its place eventually.**



# Create a safe box

Create your own safe box to help you through times when you feel overwhelmed by emotion and have the urge to harm yourself.



**Let's put in some things to distract you and keep you safe.**

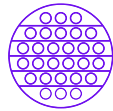
**Pick three songs to queue up on your phone**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



**Pick three things you can do with your hands**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



**Put in three items that make you feel good:**

Photos of loved ones, a note from a friend, a soft toy?

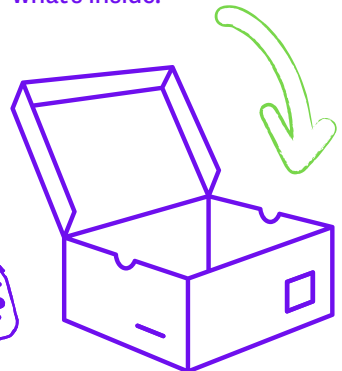
1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Fill this out, fill up your box with your items, and put this sheet inside to refer to when you need to ride the wave of your urges. Try to distract yourself with what's inside.

**Put in three things to distract your brain:**

Like a colouring book, or a video game, or puzzle.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

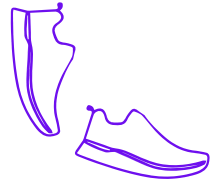


## After the urge passes – let's make time for some self-care.

**Try to spend some time doing an activity you enjoy:**

3 things you could do:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

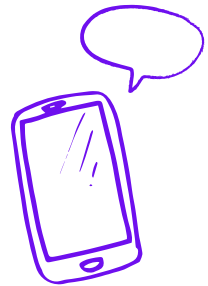


## You're not alone. Let's add in some details of people you can talk to.

**Write down the number of people you could call:**

You can also add when they are available, e.g. daytimes, night times, at school etc. If you can't or don't want to add anyone, take a look at the organisations listed below.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_



## Some organisations that will be able to support you:



**Samaritans**

**116 123** (open 24/7)



**Childline**

**0800 1111** (open 24/7)



**Self Injury Support**

**0808 800 8088**

(Mon & Thu, 7pm-10pm)

## If you harmed yourself

If you hurt yourself, it's important you apply first aid to prevent the injuries from becoming infected.

If you have a serious injury, feel unwell or feel that you are going into shock (fast breathing, racing heart, feeling faint or panicked) you should seek help immediately.

Call 999 or visit A&E. For non-emergency help, you should talk to your GP or contact 111 and select the mental health option.

# I am worried about someone else



**If you are worried that someone you know is self-harming, it is important to know what to look out for and the steps to take. Below is some information that can help.**

## Signs of self-harm to look out for

It can be difficult to tell whether someone is self-harming. Here are some signs that might suggest someone could be hurting themselves:

- ✦ unexplained cuts, bruises or marks
- ✦ covering up all the time, even in hot weather
- ✦ acting quieter than usual
- ✦ withdrawal or isolation from everyday life
- ✦ lacking energy
- ✦ signs of depression such as low mood, tearfulness or a lack of motivation or interest in things they once found interesting
- ✦ talking about self-harming or suicide
- ✦ changes in mood or mood swings, for example, becoming more aggressive than usual
- ✦ changes in eating or sleeping habits
- ✦ misusing drugs or alcohol
- ✦ expressing feelings of failure, uselessness or loss of hope
- ✦ risk-taking behaviours
- ✦ signs of low self-esteem such as blaming themselves for any problems or saying they are not 'good enough'.



It is important to know that these signs may not always mean someone is self-harming – they could be indicators of other issues. Also, as is often the case with someone who hurts themselves, there may be no warning signs at all. Therefore, if you suspect that someone you know is self-harming, it's important to talk to them openly and honestly – and without blame.

## What to do if you are worried about someone

If you are worried that someone you know is self-harming, it can be difficult to know what to do. When you are

aware there is an issue, it is important that you do not wait.

Waiting in the hopes that they come to you for help might cause valuable time to be lost. Intervening early can help your loved one get support and treatment to help them recover.

Be mindful that they might not feel ready or able to talk about their self-harm. Let them lead the discussion at their own pace, and don't pressure them to tell you details they aren't ready to talk about. It takes a lot of trust and courage to open up about self-harm – you might be the first person they have been able to talk to about this.

## Someone has told you they're self-harming. Now what?

The following tips for talking to someone about their self-harm are based on advice from leading self-harm recovery experts:

- Set aside plenty of time to talk to them where you will be free from interruption. If you don't have time at that particular moment, make sure to make time later in the day when you can listen to them free from distraction. Sensitively communicate this to them by saying something like, 'I don't have time at the moment to give you the attention I'd like. Can we sit down to talk this afternoon?'
- If possible, remove distractions such as computers and phones. This will allow you to give your full attention, letting them know you are there to listen to and support them.
- Acknowledge how difficult it must be to open up about their self-harm but don't concentrate on or encourage them to tell you details about specific injuries or behaviours. Instead, ask questions about how they are feeling and what they are going through.
- Don't react with shock or disgust. It may be difficult to understand why someone would harm themselves, but negative reactions can hurt the other person's feelings and make them less likely to open up about their self-harm or seek help in the future.
- You might not understand what they are going through, but let them know you are there for them regardless – and that there are lots of support options available.
- Avoid giving ultimatums; for example, saying 'Stop or else...' as these rarely work, and may lead them to become more secretive about their self-harm and avoid talking about it or seeking help in the future.
- Be positive and let them know that things will get better. With the right help and support, people can fully recover from self-harm.

■ If a friend has told you that they are hurting themselves, encourage them to talk to an adult they trust – such as a parent or teacher. You could also offer to go with them as support. If they refuse to tell anyone, let them know you can't keep this a secret as you're worried about their safety, then tell a trusted adult.

■ Offer them help in seeking professional support and provide information on ways to do this. You might want to offer to go to the GP with them or help them talk to a trusted adult or family member. Try not to take control and allow them to make decisions.

■ Know your limits. If you believe they are in immediate danger or have injuries that need medical attention, it's important to take action to make sure they are safe. Call 111 and choose option 2 for 'mental health' to access local mental health crisis services.

If it is a family member or close friend you are concerned about, they might not want to talk to you. Try not to take this personally: telling someone you love about self-harm can be difficult as they might be worried about upsetting you.

Whether you approach someone you are worried about, or someone opens up to you about their self-harm, it is important that you respond in a non-judgemental, caring and respectful way. It can be difficult to see someone you love in distress or understand why they would hurt themselves.

However, you should try to see the person for **who** they are and the potential reasons **why** they have harmed themselves rather than concentrating on the behaviours.



## Main points

- make time
- listen
- be open and honest
- don't judge
- offer support
- remember the person behind the behaviour

# Further help, information and support

If you are worried about the immediate wellbeing of yourself or someone else you should call 999 or go straight to A&E. For non-emergency help, you should talk to your GP or contact 111 and select the mental health option.

You can also get more information or support through the organisations listed below:

## **Samaritans**

Samaritans offer emotional support 24 hours a day – in full confidence.

Call 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org).

## **YoungMinds**

Supports the mental health of children and young people through online information and resources, and a helpline for parents.

Visit [youngminds.org.uk](https://youngminds.org.uk) or call 0808 802 5544 (Parents Helpline)

## **Self Injury Support**

Provides expert advice, information, and self-help resources and offers a free helpline.

Visit [selfinjurysupport.org.uk](https://selfinjurysupport.org.uk) or call 0808 800 8088

## **Childline**

Offers a counselling service for under 19s. Speak to a trained counsellor for free on their helpline.

Visit [childline.org.uk](https://childline.org.uk) or call: 0800 1111

## LifeSIGNS

Provides information and support to people of all ages affected by self-injury across the UK.

Visit [lifesigns.org.uk](https://lifesigns.org.uk)

## Alumina

Alumina is UK-based and offers free, online seven-week courses for young people who self-harm.

Visit [selfharm.co.uk](https://selfharm.co.uk)

## The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Find a therapist through the online directory.

Visit [bacp.co.uk](https://bacp.co.uk)



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## Useful contacts and notes

[illegible]

# Together, we can help you understand self-harm and how to help yourself or others.

No one should have to deal with emotional distress and self-harm alone. We should all have access to strategies to help us cope. At the Mental Health Foundation, we believe everyone deserves to know how to manage their mental health.

Mental Health Foundation is the UK charity solely focused on preventing poor mental health and building and protecting good mental health. We research, develop and campaign for new and more effective ways to support and protect people's good mental health.

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