

# Self-harm

Information for parents and guardians

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm, or self-injury, describes a wide range of things people intentionally do to themselves that cause some form of physical hurt. It can be very difficult for parents and carers to know about - or witness - self-harming behaviours in their children.

Cutting the arms or the back of the legs is the most common form of self-harm, but it can take many forms, including burning, biting or hitting oneself, banging head on walls, pulling out hair inserting harmful objects into the body or taking overdoses.

Some argue that risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking, taking drugs and having unprotected sex are also a form of self-harming.

## Reasons for self-harm

A person may self-harm to help them cope with negative feelings and difficult experiences, to feel more in control, or because they feel they need to punish themselves. It can be a way of relieving overwhelming feelings that build up inside, or an attempt to:

- reduce tension
- manage extreme emotional upset
- provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- regain control over feelings or problems
- punish themselves or others

The feelings or experiences that might be connected to self-harm include [anxiety](#), [depression](#), [low self-esteem](#), poor body image, uncertainty over gender identity or sexuality and how others may respond, , [abuse](#), school problems, bullying, social media pressure, family or friendship troubles and bereavement.

Over time, self-harming can become a habit that is hard to stop.

## These are some things that may really make a difference:

1. Discovering your child is self-harming will inevitably have a big emotional effect on you. It's very important that you stay calm and let them know that you're there to help

and support them.

2. Try not to take it personally or blame yourself. Concentrate on showing you understand and want to help.
3. If your child wants to talk about their self-harm and why they're doing it, sit down and listen. If they're finding it hard to speak to you face-to-face, you could suggest they put their thoughts into an email or letter instead.
4. Avoid asking your child lots of questions all at once.
5. Keep an eye on your child but avoid 'policing' them as this will likely increase anxiety and the risk of self-harming. Giving them their own space will help build up their confidence and trust.
6. Remember that self-harm is a coping mechanism. It is a symptom of an underlying problem so try to talk about how they're feeling and work out alternative coping mechanisms together. This might be a hobby or talking to friends and family.
7. Keep open communication between you and your child and remember they may feel ashamed of their self-harm and find it very difficult to talk about. [Here are some ways you could start the conversation.](#)
8. Talk to your child but keep things calm – try to help them, rather than confront them.
9. If they have any current wounds that require medical attention do not delay going to the hospital.
10. If you feel confident, you can ask them whether removing whatever they are using to self-harm reduces the likelihood of harm, or whether it would mean they end up using something less sanitary instead. This can be a difficult question to ask, so if you don't feel confident seek professional advice before raising this with your child.
11. Seek professional help. Your child may need a risk assessment from a qualified mental health professional. Talk to your GP and explore whether your child can be referred to your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
12. Discovering and responding to self-harm can be a traumatic experience – it's crucial that you seek support for yourself. It's natural to feel guilt, shame, anger, sadness, frustration and despair – but no-one is at fault here. Your child is experiencing a difficult time and trying to cope.