

PARENT PACK

KEEP SAFE

LETS TALK ABOUT SELF HARM



About This Guide

This guide was developed from talking to parents and carers of young people and is aimed at helping parents, carers, other family members and friends cope when a young person is self-harming. It includes information on the nature and causes of self-harm, how to support a young person when facing this problem and what help is available.



What is Self-Harm

Self-harm is behaviour that is done deliberately to harm oneself. At least 10% of adolescents report having self-harmed.

Self-harm can include, for example:

- *self-cutting*
- *taking an overdose*
- *hitting or bruising*
- *burning*

Although some people who self-harm may be suicidal, self-harm is often used as a way of managing difficult emotions without being a suicide attempt. However, self-harming can result in accidental death.

Is your child Self-Harm

As a parent, you might suspect your child is self-harming. If you are worried, watch out for these signs:

- *Unexplained cuts*
- *Burns or bruises*
- *Keeping themselves covered avoiding swimming or changing clothes around others*
- *Being withdrawn or isolated from friends and family*
- *Low mood, lack of interest in life or depression*
- *Blaming themselves for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness, hopelessness or anger*

Reason for Self-Harm

Self-harm can serve several different functions:

- *to manage extreme emotional upset*
- *to reduce tension*
- *to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain*
- *to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration a form of escape*
- *an effort to regain control over feelings or problems*
- *an attempt to punish themselves or others to elicit care from others to identify with a peer group*

Finding out your child self- Harming

Some children may tell their parents about their self-harm; other parents find out from friends, teachers or medical staff. Discovering that your child is self-harming can be very upsetting and stressful. Parents may experience a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, helplessness, shame or disgust. It is normal to feel strong emotions and important to try and understand and accept them so that you don't risk misdirecting them at your child. Try to think of their behaviour as an expression of deep emotions they can't handle any other way.



Look after yourself

It is normal for parents to experience strong emotions and it is important that you look after yourself as well as your child. Recovery from self-harm may be a long process, so try to find time for relaxation. Pay attention to the physical signs of stress, such as stomach aches, difficulty sleeping, or depression. Take time for yourself when you are upset. Do things you enjoy, such as going out with friends, exercise, hobbies, etc. Learn to identify and accept your own feelings. It may help to write them down. Find an outlet for your emotions, such as talking to a friend, relative or therapist. You may find other emotions coming out as anger – be careful that your child does not think this is directed at them.

Alternatives to self-harm

Because self-harm is helping your child to cope with difficult feelings, it is important to think of other ways they might manage their feelings. These can include distraction, stress management techniques, and thinking of alternative methods of discharging extreme emotions. Sometimes joining a social activity or sports group can be helpful as a distraction. This can also provide a form of social support. Some people find that putting off harming themselves can decrease or get rid of the urge. Reducing the accessibility of objects that might be used for self-harm (e.g., pencil sharpeners, knives, medication etc.) may help to delay the impulse to self-harm.

Soothing/Stress Relief/Distraction:

- *Going for a walk, looking at things and listening to sounds*
- *Create something: drawing, writing, music or sculpture*
- *Going to a public place, away from the house*
- *Keeping a diary or weblog*
- *Stroking or caring for a pet*
- *Watching TV or a movie Getting in touch with a friend Listening to soothing music*
- *Having a relaxing bath*

Releasing emotions:

- *Clenching an ice cube in the hand until it melts*
- *Snapping an elastic band against the wrist*
- *Drawing on the skin with a red pen or red paint instead of cutting*
- *Sports or physical exercise*
- *Using a punchbag. Hitting a pillow or other soft object*
- *Listening to or creating loud music*



How you can help

If you think a young person might be self-harming, the most important thing to do is to remain calm and listen to them. Self-harm is often seen as a coping mechanism, albeit an unhealthy one, to adversities and distressing emotions that are difficult to comprehend.

Be empathetic and non-judgemental. The young person is in a vulnerable situation and they need to feel safe when asking for help. Be mindful of body language. Opening up about self-harm is difficult and the young person is looking for signs of judgement so it's important not to show those.

If they're not engaging in the conversation, focus on talking to them about other things to encourage them to feel more comfortable in talking about sensitive topics with you.

Working with a young person who has disclosed they are self-harming is vital. Don't take control away from them by telling them what to do.



Listen

Listen to what they're saying, watch what they're doing. Self-harm is a sign of distress.

Empathise

Take time to sit down and talk with them before risk-assessing the situation. Focus on engaging and developing a relationship with them.

Ascertain

What is the intention behind the self-harm? Is there an identified trigger? What were they expecting to happen after self-harming? It's okay to ask them some questions and, if they're having difficulty expressing themselves verbally, try another means of communication such as asking them to write how they're feeling.

Reflect

Show them that you've listened. Summarise what they said. Don't tell them to stop self-harming if they don't feel able to. Do talk to them about what they might do instead to manage the distressing emotions. Alternative methods such as ice cubes, drawing on skin or exercise can be helpful.

Normalise

Don't be afraid to speak about mental health. It's vital to break the stigma and okay to use the term self-harm in conversation.

Be honest with them and say that if you feel they're at serious risk, you'll need to share your concerns with a healthcare professional, who might be better able to help. If they don't want you to share information, try to find out why and address their concerns. Where possible, involve them in making decisions.

Other ways to help

- *Don't let self-harm become the focus of your relationship with your child*
- *Try to deal with self-harm in a matter-of fact manner*
- *Let your child know that their emotions are real and important*
- *Remind your child of their strengths and abilities*
- *Reassure them that you do not think they are a failure whatever their difficulties*
- *Explain to your child that you want to help but may not know the best thing to do, and try to come up with a solution together (e.g., visiting the GP)*
- *Work out with your child how to make it more difficult for them to self-harm (e.g., by storing medication securely or removing sharp objects)*
- *Watch for signs of bullying or abuse that may be triggering self-harm*



Resources

Young Minds

www.youngminds.org.uk Young
Minds Parent Helpline: 0808 802
5544 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm)

Samaritans 116 123

www.samaritans.org

Mind (over 18s only)

www.mind.org.uk

Rethink www.rethink.org

Harmless www.harmless.org.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/
parentsandyounginfo/parentscarer
s/self-harm.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyounginfo/parentscarers/self-harm.aspx)

Gloucestershire Healthy Living
and Learning

TIC+ parent help line

Professional Help:

GPs

School Counsellors

School Nurses Child and
Adolescent Mental Health
Services*

Adult Mental Health Services*

*Usually through referral by GP or
other professional

Helplines and Online Information/
Support:

Childline - 0800 1111

www.childline.org

www.ghll.org.uk

[https://ticplus.org.uk/parents-
carers/parent-and-carer-support/](https://ticplus.org.uk/parents-carers/parent-and-carer-support/)
[0800 6525675](tel:08006525675)



This booklet was created by Young Minds Matter Gloucestershire, part of the School's Mental Health Support Team.

