

Talking about Self-Harm

Talking about self-harm can be difficult, and sometimes it's hard to know how to approach the conversation. This guide is for parents, carers, and professionals who are supporting young people who are self-harming, or may be having thoughts about this, and offers information about self-harm, tips for talking about it, and where to find support.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm refers to when a person purposefully hurts themselves, and can occur in a number of ways. This could be physical injury, deliberately putting oneself in danger, or causing ourselves emotional distress.

If a young person is self-harming, this is often a sign that they are in need of support. It is sometimes a way of coping when feelings or situations feel too overwhelming; if a young person tells you they are self-harming, it is important to talk about it as this allow them to feel heard and understood, and feel safe to seek further help.

It can take time for a young person to open up when they are struggling. Try to give them space to talk in their own time, listen without judgement, and reassure them that it's good they've spoken to you about this.



Why can it happen?

It is often assumed that self-harm is always a sign of suicidal ideation, however anyone can be affected by self-harm for a number of reasons.

⚡ TRIGGER WARNING ⚡

A few reasons a person may self-harm include:

- To try and cope with overwhelming feelings
- To express emotions such as anger or frustration
- To relieve tension or pressure
- To distract from difficult thoughts or feelings
- To punish themselves or others
- To try and regain control over feelings or situations

Starting a conversation about self-harm

Ways to start a conversation:

- "I've noticed you've not seemed yourself lately... is there anything you'd like to talk about?"
- "It sounds like you have a lot going on at the moment. Do you want to talk about it?"
- "I can see you've (...) and I'm worried about how you are."
- "Is there something on your mind lately? I'm here to listen if you'd like to talk."

Helpful responses to a disclosure:

- "You're not in any trouble. It's good that you've talked to me about this."
- "It sounds like you're having a difficult time. It's OK to struggle and I'm here to listen."
- "You are not alone - there's lots of support available, and I can help you with this."
- "I understand that it's difficult to cope right now. We can explore other strategies that can help you cope while keeping you safe."



Offering to be with the young person when they speak to the GP (or another safeguarding professional) may help them feel more at ease and supported.

Talking to young people about confidentiality

If you are concerned for a young person's wellbeing and need to break confidentiality, it can be difficult to communicate this to the young person, especially if they ask you to keep it secret or not to tell anyone.

Here are some ways to explain why it's important to report safeguarding concerns:

To make sure you get the support you need, we need to speak to someone else who can help.

You matter, and your life is too important to not talk about this with people who can help.

We will only involve the necessary people, who can make sure you find the best support for you.

TIPS AND ADVICE

Safer ways to cope

If a young person is self-harming as a way of coping with difficult feelings or situations, it may not be helpful for them to stop immediately. Instead, we can help them develop alternative coping strategies that still provide relief but reduce the risk of health complications (e.g. infections from untreated injuries).

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Practising self-care can help to boost self-esteem and make it easier to cope when things feel overwhelming. Some ideas that could be helpful are:

- **Something fun** - listening to music, cooking new recipes together, popping some bubble wrap, playing games

- **Something creative** - drawing, painting, crafting, or perhaps designing something on their phone
- **Something new** - trying a new hobby or activity, or going for a walk together to get space and fresh air
- **Something comforting** - getting enough sleep, eating their favourite food, and feeling safe to cry or let feelings out



Safer alternatives to self-harm:

- **Rubbing ice cubes on skin**
- **Drawing or writing on the area the person wanted to harm**
- **Having a cold shower or running cold water over skin**
- **Screaming into a pillow or empty room**
- **Hitting a soft object (e.g. a cushion)**
- **Tearing something up (e.g. a magazine)**
- **Clenching muscles then relaxing (repeat as needed)**

Where to find support

