

Self-harm

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when we deliberately hurt ourselves to relieve emotional distress. For some, this can lead to a sense of calm or it can provide a sensory experience to replace a feeling of numbness. While it can give temporary relief from the emotional distress it doesn't address the underlying issues that cause the difficult feelings.

Self-injury can include cutting, burning, stabbing, scratching, hair pulling and bruising, but self-harm can also occur in less direct ways such as exercising excessively, over- or undereating, drinking to excess, or indulging in risky behaviours.

What makes someone hurt themselves?

There isn't one answer as to why someone hurts themselves. It can be related to unhappy experiences in the past or a traumatic event such as being attacked. Current events can reinforce old feelings of distress, particularly when life is very stressful, or a person feels isolated, lacking support or understanding.

Although self-harm isn't a constructive way of dealing with these difficulties, it may serve as a way of:

- telling people something is wrong
- legitimising emotional pain
- gaining a sense of control
- bringing a sense of relief
- managing unacceptable feelings such as anger
- punishing oneself
- expressing shame and self-hatred
- restoring a capacity to feel, by overcoming numbness.

Self-injury is a way of both indicating that difficulties exist and an attempt to cope with the problems.

How you can help yourself

- It is very important you care for your injuries with basic first aid: keep cuts clean and wrapped, burns need to be cooled and covered. If you are in any doubt, do seek some medical help, perhaps from a school/college nurse or your GP.

- The more you understand your need to injure yourself, the more likely you are to be able to make choices and look after yourself.
- Talking to a friend or family member about your feelings and self-injury may help, but choose carefully who to tell. Be prepared for an emotional, even shocked reaction - and go on to say what you need, such as to be listened to not lectured; to be treated normally and not repeatedly asked if you are OK; to be distracted or offered companionship; or even to be given a hug and a cup of tea.
- If you feel uncomfortable about talking to a family member or friend, then try talking to a professional you feel you could trust, such as a school/college nurse, your GP or a counsellor.

Perhaps you want to stop hurting yourself but do not know how to begin or realise it will be really hard. It is possible to stop. Even making a little change in the right direction is important; go at your own pace, do as much or as little as you can.

Stopping harming yourself is likely to involve both loss and fear. Many may not understand this, but in stopping you may feel that you risk losing any sense of control, or losing the means to express how you feel. And initially you may feel afraid that you will not be able to find any good and adequate alternatives.

Talking to a counsellor is a good way of having some support while you take the risk to stop.

How you can help others

It is natural to feel upset, helpless, even angry about what your friend or family member is doing. Rather than being frightened, regard it as a way s/he uses to cope with the difficulties in their life. Of course you want your friend to stop the self-injury but you cannot force them to stop. However, you can help by:

- trying to understand how self-injury makes your friend's life easier and being accepting of her/his felt need to do it
- encouraging your friend to talk and listening sympathetically to the feelings involved
- seeing your friend as a whole person not just someone who self-injures

- maintaining a balance in the friendship through sharing your own pleasures and worries too, as a friendship ceases to be that if it is all one way
- suggesting your friend calls if s/he feels upset or wants to hurt her/himself but be aware of your own needs too. You may be tired or have your own pressures so it's important to be able to say 'no' if you need to. It is better to offer a little support that you can sustain, rather than offering a lot and then withdrawing it.

Don't feel you need to do all this by yourself. If the problem starts to get on top of you, find someone to talk to – preferably a person who is neutral and outside of the situation such as a school/college nurse or GP, a chaplain, or your tutor.