

SELF-HARM

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Self-harm is when a person causes physical damage to him or herself. It usually involves activities such as cutting or scratching with sharp objects. This leaflet looks at how to learn to cope with and stop self-harming.

Why do people self-harm?

People sometimes harm themselves in order to try and cope with their problems. For some people, the pain of self-harm can help stop strong feelings such as upsetting thoughts or anger. Some people who harm themselves do so because they hate themselves or their bodies. This might be the result of being abused or remembering abuse.

How common is self-harm?

Self-harm is surprisingly common. Each year, more than 24,000 teenagers are admitted to UK hospitals after deliberately harming themselves. A recent survey of teenage girls in Edinburgh showed that nearly one in three have self-harmed.

Why is self-harm a problem?

When people harm themselves there is a risk of serious physical damage and infection. In the longer term there is a risk of permanent damage and ugly scarring. People who harm themselves usually feel ashamed and disgusted, and become depressed about what they are doing.

Once people start self-harming they can become 'addicted' to it. Just like any other bad habit, it can be very difficult to stop. The original need for self-harm might not be there any more. What's left is a vicious circle of feeling bad / harming / feeling bad / harming.

How do you know if you're ready to stop?

Most people who self-harm want to stop, but may feel they are not ready or could not manage without self-harming. Stopping never has to be an 'all or none' process. If you decide to **try** to stop, celebrate your successes and learn from your failures, you will get there in the end.

The first task when you've decided to try to stop is to break the cycle, and try new ways of coping. You **do** have to **force** yourself to do this; it doesn't just come. If you **choose** to harm yourself in the next crisis, you will know that it is a **choice**. This implies that there are other choices that could be made.

Dealing with self-harm

There are a number of different 'in the moment' strategies you can try. These strategies can work because they help you with the strong emotions that make you want to self-harm. They can teach you that you **can** get through a crisis without harming yourself.

1. Buy some time

If you get the urge to harm yourself, tell yourself that if you still want to do it in 10 minutes, you can. When the time is up, see if you can go another 10. Gradually increase the time you wait. This really works!

2. Learn how you feel

The best way to increase the chances of calming the urge to harm is to match how you are feeling to what you do. First, take a few moments to look behind the urge.

What are you feeling?

- angry, frustrated, restless?
- sad, soft, melancholy, depressed, unhappy?
- craving sensation, feeling unreal?
- wanting focus?
- wanting to see blood?
- wanting to see scars or pick scabs?

How do you feel?

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3. Dealing with the feeling

Match the feeling to an activity. Some examples:

Angry, frustrated, restless:

Use a pillow to hit a wall. Rip up an old newspaper or phone book. On a sketch or photo of yourself, mark in red ink what you want to do. Clean your room (or your whole house). Go for a walk/jog/run.

Sad, soft, melancholy, depressed, unhappy:

Do something slow and soothing, like taking a hot bath with bath oil or bubbles. Do something that makes you feel taken care of and comforted. Listen to soothing music or call a friend and just talk about things that you like.

Craving sensation, feeling unreal:

Do something that creates a sharp physical sensation. Squeeze ice **hard** (this really hurts). Put a finger into a frozen food (like ice cream) for a minute. Bite into a hot pepper or chew a piece of ginger root. Snap an elastic band on your wrist.

Wanting focus:

Focus on how it feels to breathe. Notice the way your chest and stomach move with each breath. Do something that you really need to focus on, like playing a computer game. Choose an object in the room. Examine it carefully and then write as detailed a description of it as you can. Include as much as you can: size, weight, texture, shape, colour, possible uses, and feel. Choose a random object, like a wastepaper bin, and try to list 30 different uses for it.

Wanting to see blood:

Draw on yourself with a red felt-tip pen. Make a tray of red ice by dropping six or seven drops of red food colour into each of the wells. Use these to draw on the parts of you that you'd like to cut.

Wanting to see scars or pick scabs:

Get a henna tattoo kit. Put the henna on as a paste and leave it overnight; the next day you can pick it off as you would a scab and it leaves an orange-red mark behind.

"I tried but I still want to harm myself."

Can you wait another 10 minutes and repeat the 3 steps above?

Sometimes you will make a huge effort to keep from harming yourself but nothing seems to work. You feel that if you don't harm yourself, you'll explode. What now?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- why do I want to harm myself?
- have I felt like this before?
- have I dealt with this a different way in the past?
- what else can I do that won't hurt?
- how will I feel tomorrow morning?
- do I need to harm myself?

If you don't feel ready to stop yet, you can still take more control over your self-harming. If you feel you **need** to harm yourself, allow yourself to do so, **but** decide beforehand what you are going to do and stick to your limits. If you choose to do this, you should take care to remain as safe as possible when harming yourself.

Staying Safe

If you must cut then you can try to do so in the least harmful way.

- Don't share things you use to self-harm with anyone else. If you do, you risk infection (hepatitis, AIDS, etc).
- Try to keep cuts shallow. Keep first aid supplies on hand and know what to do in the case of emergencies.
- Do as little as you can, just to ease your distress. Set limits. Decide how much you are going to allow yourself to do and keep to it. You can clean up and bandage yourself later.
- There are herbal remedies that can help reduce scarring.

What if someone I know is self-harming?

No one **wants** to self-harm. Someone who is self-harming is likely to be very upset. He or she will need support from someone who is calm and understanding. Telling someone **not** to do something is more likely to make him or her do it. Remember being told to tidy your room? A person who is self-harming wants to stop, but doesn't know how to do so. He or she has no better way of dealing with the upsetting things that are happening.

Try to talk and let the person tell you about what is really wrong or upsetting him or her. Read this leaflet to learn some helpful tips you can pass on to help the person stop self-harming. Be prepared to help him or her clean up and dress wounds using sterile dressings. You should try your best not to show negative feelings whilst you are doing this. Caring support is needed; it doesn't mean you are giving in to the behaviour.

When the person is calmer you can see if he or she is willing to have a talk about what they have done. You might then be able to help them identify the thing that has led to the self-harm.

Further help: There are other booklets in this series that may help with specific problems such as anger or worry and problem solving. (For how to order, see back page.)

Websites

www.nshn.co.uk Provides support for people who self-harm. Also supports the people it indirectly affects, like family and friends, they can discuss the issue and gain effective support in on line forums.

www.themix.org.uk/mental-health/self-harm On the site you will find access to books and articles discussing various forms of self injury and depression; current news regarding self injury and injurers rights; frequently asked questions about why people self injure and what can be done to help them as well as a list of links to other boards dealing with similar topics.

www.seemescotland.org/stigma-discrimination/stigma-relating-to-individual-mental-health-conditions/self-harm/ a useful website.

www.lifesigns.org.uk For people who self-injure. There is a self-help section featuring methods of distraction and tips about alternatives to self-injury. There is a forum where you can receive support and meet people who are in a similar situation. There is a section for friends and family that answers any questions they may have and aims to help them understand self-injury.

Helplines

Breathing Space – mental health helpline

(Weekday: Mon-Thurs 6pm-2am)

(Weekend: Fri 6pm-Mon 6am)

Tel: 0800 83 85 87

Samaritans – confidential support for anyone in a crisis

National Helpline (24 hours a day)

Tel: 116 123

Borders

Tel: 01750 20000 (local rate)

E-mail Helpline

jo@samaritans.org (answer within 24 hours)

Local Branch

21 West Port, Selkirk, TD7 4DG

The Mix – essential support for under 25s

Tel: 0808 808 4994

(freephone)

Apps for mobile phone and tablets

A range of self-help apps are available for your mobile phone and tablet. Some of these apps are free of charge, whilst others have a cost attached depending on the developer. Please use the link below to view some suggested self-help apps for different mental health problems:

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

Notes

Booklets/leaflets available on the following:

Agoraphobia
Anger
Anxiety
Bereavement
Depression
Hyperventilation
Loss
OCD
Panic (short version and long version)
Phobia
Problem solving
Relaxation
Self-Esteem
Self-Help Websites
Sleep
Stress
Trauma
Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available to
download/print at:

nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing

S Black, R Donald, J Hastings, M Henderson 2005
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