

# Self-harm

## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is where someone does something to deliberately hurt themselves when they find things difficult to cope with. Unlike suicide attempts, self-harming behaviours are not driven by a desire to end one's life. However, some self-injurious behaviours may be life-threatening. It can include things like:

- Self-cutting
- Hitting
- Burning
- Picking or scratching skin
- Hair Pulling
- Head banging
- Suffocating
- Eating/drinking dangerous substances



## What makes someone hurt themselves?

Self-harm can serve several different functions:

- to reduce tension
- to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- an effort to regain control over feelings or problems
- an attempt to punish self or others
- to identify with a peer group

## Signs & Symptoms

Detecting self-harm behaviour can be difficult. People who engage in this behaviour are usually secretive, and will hurt themselves in places that are easy to hide with clothing. Or they may give excuses for their injuries, such as "I'm so clumsy, I scratched my arm moving some boxes." Here are some warning signs of self-harm:

- Unexplained burns, cuts, bruising, scars, healing or healed wounds, or similar markings on the skin — small, linear cuts are especially common
- Implausible stories that may explain one, but not all, physical injuries
- Consistently wearing long sleeves or pants, even when inappropriate for the weather
- Constantly wearing wristbands, large watchbands or large bracelets
- Frequent bandages or other methods of covering wounds
- Odd or unexplainable paraphernalia, such as razor blades or needles
- Unwillingness to participate in activities that expose the body, such as swimming



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## Managing injuries from self-harm

**Overdoses:** Inform someone close to you and get you to an emergency department as soon as possible. Inform him/her what you have taken, or pass him/her the empty pill bottles or blister packs.



**Cuts and Wounds:** Apply pressure to bleeding cuts using a bandage or towel to stop the bleeding. Clean the wound under running tap water and apply a sterile adhesive dressing. If the wound has become infected (e.g., swelling, pus forming or spreading redness), seek medical help.

**Burns:** Cool with cold water for 10 to 30 minutes, then cover with cling film. Don't use ice or any creams or greasy substances such as butter.



## How you can help yourself



Replacing self-harm with other, safer, coping strategies can be a positive way of dealing with difficult feelings. Different things work for different people, so you may need to try a few approaches to see what works for you. Helpful strategies when you want to self-harm can include:

- Hitting pillows, cushions or bean bags and having a good scream
- Going for a walk or run, or other kinds of exercise
- Snapping an elastic band on your wrist
- Watch your favourite TV show/funny videos online
- Crying can be helpful
- Try to be around people until the urge or feeling passes
- Talking to someone you trust
- Avoid social media that makes you feel bad about yourself
- Looking at supportive websites/message a helpline
- Read a good book
- Holding an ice cube against your skin instead of cutting
- Play video games
- Wrap your usual tool in a whole roll of sticky tape so that it's difficult to access

## How you can help others

Someone has told me they are hurting themselves; what should I do?

### Do

- Offer your friend a kind smile or hug, and ask "what can I do to help?"
- Listen to your friend
- React calmly and be reassuring and supportive
- Let your friend know they aren't alone
- Encourage them to ask for help from an adult, and look up ideas for support and information online together
- Ensure they get medical attention if this is needed
- Make sure you find someone to talk to who can support you

### Don't

- Be judgmental
- Be dismissive of their problems
- Tell them to stop
- Panic
- Feel it is your responsibility to make things better
- Promise to keep this a secret—if you feel your friend is unsafe, tell a trusted adult. This is to keep your friend safe so they can get the help they need

#### References:

[https://www.cornwallhealthyschools.org/documents/EHWP/self%20harm%20leaflets%20/SVY-Selfharm-young-people\(blue\)-A4-2pp.pdf](https://www.cornwallhealthyschools.org/documents/EHWP/self%20harm%20leaflets%20/SVY-Selfharm-young-people(blue)-A4-2pp.pdf)  
<http://www.healthtalk.org/files/upload/Self%20harm%20parents%20guide.pdf>  
<https://www.jedfoundation.org/self-harm/#card=1>

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