Self-Harm

What is self-harm

Self-harm includes any intentional damage someone makes to their own body. It can include cutting, scratching, burning, taking too many pills, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia and over-use of drugs or alcohol. Indulging in very risky behaviours like having unsafe sex or driving dangerously can also be thought of as self-harm. Self-harm can be something you do just a few times or can become almost like an addiction and become something you do regularly.

Self-harm affects people of all ages and genders and is likely to be under reported in adults. Some may have depression, bipolar disorder or borderline personality disorder, or have suffered trauma or abuse in childhood. For some there seems to be no particular trigger at all.

What causes self-harm

People describe self-harm as a way to help them cope when they don't know what else to do. There may be money worries, or a stressful job to manage. People may have been struggling with depression or poor self-esteem. Those who feel lonely, bullied, abused, or bereaved are more at risk. There may have been a traumatic event which can have huge emotional effects many years afterwards. Sometimes people feel they need punishing, or feel the need to gain some control when their life is lacking it. These things can all be really hard to manage.

Self-harm can relieve all this emotional distress, albeit in an unhealthy way.

Self help for self-harm

There are ways to cope which are healthy. Strategies will depend on the feeling associated with the self-harm – people who are angry may want to try hitting a pillow, tearing up paper, listening to loud music or squeeze something like a tennis ball really hard. If someone is more sad, useful strategies can be to snuggle into a soft blanket, listen to quiet music or a favourite video, write down feelings or consider calling a helpline. Commonly people who self-harm can feel they have no control over their lives, so things like being creative, tidying up, gardening, or rearranging furniture can be useful.

Finally, some people describe they have no feelings at all, or are numb. For these people it is useful to do some grounding exercises. Things to try would be holding an ice cube, having a cold shower, smell a favourite perfume, or place a plaster over the area they want to harm.

The hope is that eventually the need to hurt themselves reduces or stops. If people damage their skin, they should keep wounds clean to avoid infection and consider using antiseptic wipes which can be kept in a wallet, bag or phone case. If the adult visits a GP, they may be recommended for group therapy, or medication if a mental illness could be a factor. If an adult feels they can identify other successful strategies instead of self-harm, and can 'sit' with their negative emotions, they may be ready to try to stop self-harming.

Shame and self-harm

Despite the short-term relief people can feel after self-harming, this often is followed by feelings of guilt or shame. Many individuals feel embarrassed about the injuries they have made, and are keen to keep them covered up. Shame is particularly common in adults who may have been self-harming since childhood.

Self harm and suicide

In adults it can be easy for self-mutilation to result in suicide without the intention of doing so. If a person cuts themselves badly, they will need to go to the hospital, where they should expect to be treated with respect and kindness. There are often trained psychiatric staff in emergency rooms who can talk to the person.

Self-harm can sometimes preclude suicidal thoughts, but most adults who self-harm are not suicidal. If someone is having suicidal thoughts, it is imperative that they contact a GP for advice and specialist support, or ring 111.

How can friends and family support self harm

It is important to note that learning to stop self-harming must be initiated by the adult themselves – this cannot be forced by someone else, however well-meaning. Self-harm is more prevalent in people who feel they are alone, not listened to, or lacking autonomy or power. Really listening to the adult can be a surprisingly significant support. It is important not to judge or be critical, even if you are upset yourself. You are however not a therapist – but being a loyal and patient friend or family member is really powerful. You can support the adult to see if they can identify any common thoughts or feelings that they have before they feel the need to self–harm. This can help identify triggers and allow the person to distract themselves from the thoughts for a short time.

You can offer to go to the GP with the adult, but be aware that they may not be able to stop self-harming, or not be ready to as yet. This is not a reflection on your support, but it can be really hard for you. Speak to the Samaritans or Papyrus to help you come to terms with the difficulties surrounding self-harm.

Helplines/useful contacts on self harm:

Self-help and support

Your GP

Samaritans: Telephone and email support for anyone who is worried, upset, or suicidal; 08457 90 90 90; ROI 116 123; email: jo@samaritans.org.

PAPYRUS HOPELine UK: a professionally staffed helpline providing support, practical advice and information to young people worried about themselves, and to anyone concerned that a young person may harm themselves. Tel: 0800 068 41 41.

Get Connected: offers help by telephone and email for people under 25 who self-harm. Tel: 0808 808 4994.

Selfharm.co.uk: a project dedicated to supporting young people who are affected by self-harm. Email: info@selfharm.co.uk.

Self Injury Support: provides a young women's text and email service, any age helpline for women who self-harm, UK-wide listings for self-harm support and self-help tools. Email: info@selfinjurysupport.org.uk.

Text "SHOUT" to 85258 to contact the Shout Crisis Text Line

Call 0800 585 858 to talk to Calm (if you're 15 years old or over) or use CALM webchat, both available from 5pm to midnight every day

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Self-harm - NHS

Types of mental health problems | What is self-harm? | Mind

Self-harm

Self-Harm in Adults: Self-Injury Not Limited to Teens | HealthyPlace

This information has been written using the above websites, and is believed to be correct on the day of writing. This leaflet is not designed to take the place of advice from your GP.

Nikki Fouracre, April 2026