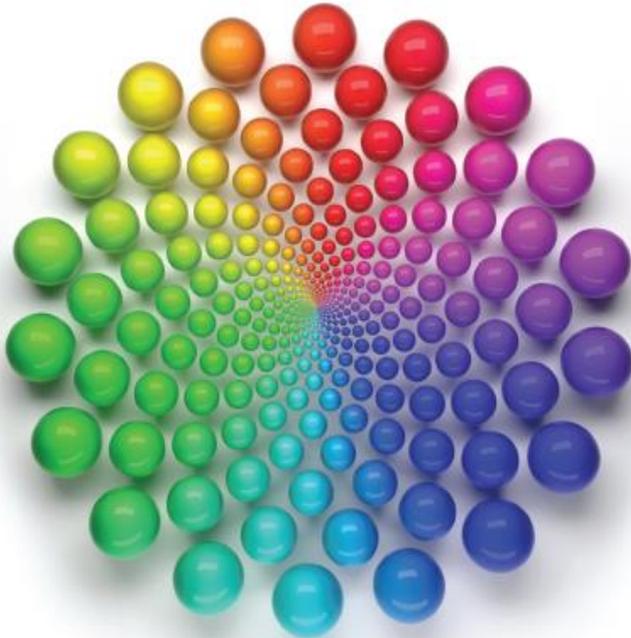




**Service Six**

Changing Lives • Creating Futures



# **Information Pack**

## **Self-Harm**

The spectrum of colour found within black and white represents the ranges of emotions, good and bad, which contribute to self-harm.

We have produced this guide to give support and advice. We want to eliminate the myths and highlight the options available to you.

This information pack was written by two young self-harmers to help you understand self-harm and how you can best aid your child. Discovery of self-harm can be very traumatic, for both the adult and the child/young person, and it is hoped that the information included in this pack will provide you with a beginning to support you and your child through this time.



***“Life can feel lonely but on your journey you will discover who will listen and care. Just be patient, there is no hurry and that hand to hold will come and rest softly in yours”***

# Content

<b>What is self-harm? .....</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>Why does a young person harm themselves? .....</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>Self-harm Cycle .....</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>Self-harm Stereotypes – Breaking down the Myths..</b>	<b>Page 7</b>
<b>How can I tell if a young person self-harms? .....</b>	<b>Page 9</b>
<b>What should I do if I discover my child is self-harming? .....</b>	<b>Page 10</b>
<b>A Young Person’s View of self-harm .....</b>	<b>Page 12</b>
<b>How can you help? .....</b>	<b>Page 13</b>
<b>Alternative ways to cope .....</b>	<b>Page 14</b>
<b>Additions to your medicine cabinet .....</b>	<b>Page 16</b>
<b>Don’t and Do’s .....</b>	<b>Page 17</b>
<b>Useful Contacts .....</b>	<b>Page 18</b>

## What is self-harm?

There can be few things more shocking and heart-breaking as a parent than discovering that your child is deliberately harming themselves.

Self-harm is a private deliberate behaviour used as a coping strategy to deal with difficult situation.

By harming themselves, your child is trying to cope with many different emotions and feelings. Frequently, self-harm is about taking control of these difficult feelings. This may be the last things in their life they feel they have control over and is often a way of dealing with complex emotions.

Self-harm can become an addiction. The act of self-harm causes a release of adrenaline, which leads to a release of endorphins. The adrenaline has a painkilling effect and produces a natural 'high'. In the same way that a smoker will have a cigarette when they feel stressed, a self-harmer will injure themselves. **It is important to remember that a child/young person will only stop hurting themselves if they want to stop, not if you want them to.**

There are many different forms of self-harm:

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scalding
- Pulling out hair
- Hitting
- Biting
- Scratching
- Anything that causes physical harm to your body
- Using alcohol or/and drugs
- Disordered eating
- Excessive nail biting
- Small overdoses
- Restrictive drinking
- Suicidal intent
- Self-bruising

Perhaps the most important thing about self-harm is that in the majority of cases it is not a suicide attempt and the child/young person concerned is not mentally ill. A lot of self-harm is not attention seeking behaviour; however, it can be seen as a cry for help. It is important to remember to focus on the reason/s behind the behaviour, not the behaviour itself.

If you discover that your child is injuring their body, it can be difficult to know how you can help. Although your words likely come from a place of love and concern, what you say to someone who self-harms can have a serious impact on their confidence and self-esteem.

## Why does a young person harm themselves?

Self-harm can be confusing and it is difficult to understand the causes and reasons for self-harm.

Self-harm is a way of people coping with whatever is going on in their lives and gives them control over at least one thing and in some cases it might be the last thing they have control over.

No one will know why someone self-harms and in some cases even they do not know. It can be a combination of things in their life not necessarily one specific experience.

It is seen as a coping mechanism attempting to alter how they feel by inflicting enough harm to release the body's natural endorphins giving a "natural high". This momentarily provides the release/experience of feelings needed/wanted which is why it is often a way of dealing with anger and stress. The feeling however is quickly replaced with the negative feelings of upset, stress, guilt, shame which causes the vicious cycle. In the same way a smoker will turn to cigarettes when stressed, a self-harmer will injure themselves because they can become dependent on this being their method of coping mechanism.

Young people do it for a whole host of reasons to cope with overwhelming and distressing thoughts or feelings, including:

- to reduce tension
- to manage extreme emotional upset
- to distract them from emotional pain
- to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- to regain control over feelings or problems
- to punish themselves or others
- to receive care from others
- to identify with a peer group



***“I just want to talk to someone who will listen;  
not about my self-harm but other stuff”***

Self-harm usually starts as a way to relieve the build-up of pressure from distressing thoughts and feelings. This might give temporary relief from the emotional pain the young person is feeling. It is important to know that this relief is only temporary because the underlying reasons still remain. Soon after, feelings of guilt and shame might follow, which can continue the cycle.

Over time, self-harming can become a habit that is hard to stop. **It is important to remember that a child/young person will not always feel that way but will only stop hurting themselves if they want to stop, not if you want them to.**

## Self-Harm Cycle



## Self-harm Stereotypes – Breaking down the Myths

There are lots of stereotypes and myths attached to self-harm. This is not surprising – this often arise when a problem like self-harm is poorly understood. Negative stereotypes can be powerful. They need to be challenged because they stop people talking about their issues and asking for help. These myths also mean that professionals, family and friends can misunderstand young people who self-harm.

Here are some popular stereotypes/myths:

***‘Self-harm is attention-seeking’*** - One of the most common stereotypes is that self-harm is about ‘attention seeking’. This is not the case. Many young people who self-harm don’t talk to anyone about what they are going through for a long time and it can be very hard for them to find enough courage to ask for help.

***‘Self-harm is a goth thing’*** - Self-harm has been stereotyped to be seen as part of youth subcultures such as “goth” or “emo”. While there is some research suggesting a link, there is no conclusive evidence of this with little or no evidence supporting the belief that self-harm is part of any particular young person subculture.

***‘Only girls self-harm’*** - It is often assumed that girls are more likely than boys to self-harm, however it is not clear if this is true. Boys and girls may engage with different self-harming behaviours or have different reasons for hurting themselves, but this doesn’t make it any less serious.

***‘People who self-harm must enjoy it’*** - Some people believe that young people who self-harm take pleasure in the pain or risk associated in the behaviour. There is no evidence that young people who self-harm feel pain differently than anyone else. The harming behaviour often causes young people great pain. For some, being depressed has left them numb and they want to feel anything to remind them they are alive, even if it hurts. Others have described this pain as punishment.

***'People who self-harm are suicidal'*** - Self-harm is sometimes viewed as a suicide attempt by people who don't understand it. For many young people self-harm is about trying to cope with difficult feelings and circumstances. Some young people have described it as a way of staying alive and surviving these difficulties. However, some young people who self-harm can feel suicidal and might attempt to take their own life, which is why it must always be taken seriously.

**The main point to remember is that self-harm is a very individual behaviour.**



***'People often link self-harm to suicide but for me it was something very different; it was my alternative to suicide, my way of coping even though sometimes I wished that my world would end.'***

## How can I tell if a young person self-harms?

This is very difficult as most self-harmers cope alone and there is no typical child/young person who self-harms. Because clothing can hide physical injuries, and inner turmoil can be covered up by a seemingly calm disposition, self-injury can be hard to detect. Due to deep shame and guilt, self-harmers often go to great lengths to keep their injuries a secret. As a family member, friend or youth worker, it may be up to you to be on the lookout for the warning signs of self-harm—and to talk to the person about getting help. Red flags for cutting or self-injury include:

### *Signs to be aware of can include:*

- Always keeping skin covered up; for example, by wearing long sleeves a lot of the time, especially in the summer
- Not wanting to go swimming
- Avoiding P.E. and other games activities
- Worrying about immunisations as this involves rolling up sleeves
- Becoming withdrawn and wanting to spend a lot of time alone in their room
- Change in personality
- Feeling down, low self-esteem or blaming themselves for things
- Unexplained bruises, cuts, burns or bite-marks on their body
- Blood stains on clothing, or finding tissues with blood in their room
- Outbursts of anger or risky behaviour like drinking or taking drugs



## What should I do if I discover my child is self-harming?

Finding out that your child is been hurting themselves can be really hard to accept and it is natural to feel anxious or upset. You might also start blaming yourself or feel powerless to help. But it is really important to try and stay calm and remember there are things you can do to support your child.

### *Should I try to stop my child from self-harming?*

No, if your child feels the need to self-harm they will find a way. Taking away their coping strategy may cause more harm. Trust in your relationship could be undermined if you try to stop your child's self-harm.

### *How to support your child:*

- Do NOT demand to see the self-harming areas
- Try to be open-minded and non-judgemental
- Try to view self-harm as a coping strategy
- Reassure them that it is okay to talk and that you are there for them. Remember they may prefer to talk over text or WhatsApp rather than in person. If they do feel ready to talk, try to just listen and not ask too many questions about why they have been self-harming, so it doesn't seem like you are judging them.
- Offer to help them to find healthier ways to cope with their difficult or upsetting feelings they are having
- Offer to find professional aid; a GP, School Nurse, Youth Specialist or a Counsellor. It is important not to take control as their self-harming behaviour may be their only way of being in control of something in their life
- It is important not to give ultimatums or promises as this could encourage secretive self-harm and reinforce already negative thoughts and low self-esteem
- Try not to hide or take away something they are using to self-harm as this can lead to them finding other ways to hurt themselves. You could try asking your child what would be most helpful for them and ask them to tell you when they feel they want to hurt themselves.

COURAGE

doesn't always ROAR.

Sometimes courage is that quiet voice at  
the end of the day saying  
"I WILL TRY AGAIN TOMORROW."



- You could try to come to an agreement where your child tells you when they have hurt themselves and it is important to make sure any injuries or cuts are cleaned and properly taken care of. Any serious injuries should be treated right away in a hospital
- Discovering someone you care about who is hurting themselves can cause many emotions such as shock, hurt, anger and powerlessness. You could consider off-loading your feelings onto a GP or Counsellor.
- Most importantly, reassure them that it is okay to be honest with you about what they are going through.

## A Young Person's View of Self-Harm

The illustration below shows some of the reasons for the need for young people to self-harm:



## How you can help

It is very difficult to come to terms with the fact that someone you care about is self-harming. You may feel shocked, confused, or even disgusted by self-harming behaviours - and guilty about admitting these feelings.

But acknowledging your discomfort to yourself is actually an important first step toward helping a self-harmer. And once you recognize how you feel, a big part of getting beyond any distaste or revulsion about self-harm is to learn about it. Understanding why your friend, family member or young person you work with is self-injuring can help you see the world from his or her eyes: giving you an important new perspective - and making you more mentally prepared to help.

The most valuable thing you can do when your child tells you they are self-harming is to listen and hear what they are saying. This will develop trust.

When your child is self-harming they are coping with the reason that lies underneath their emotions. As trust develops reasons for the self-harm may become clearer. For a while the self-harm may get worse as feelings and emotions are explored. The need to 'walk alongside' is so important, not to be assertive, controlling or superior but to gently communicate on the same level. Exploring solutions together provides something new to focus on and a new experience or a change in routine can help your child who is 'stuck' in a negative pattern.

BE NON-JUDGEMENTAL

LISTEN TO THEM

HEAR THEM

BE RESPECTFUL

EXPLORE SOLUTIONS

BE GENUINE

BE EMPATHETIC



WALK ALONGSIDE

## Alternative ways to cope

Here are a few distraction techniques you can suggest to the young person involved:

- Going for a walk
- Suggest rubbing ice across their skin or holding ice cubes as this shock like sensation reproduces the 'numb' feeling many self-harmers feel while or after they self-harm
- Writing negative thoughts down and then ripping them up
- Painting or drawing - this is also an alternative way of expressing emotion as well as a distraction technique
- Putting elastic bands on their arms and then flicking them
- Breaking pencils
- Screaming or punching into a pillow
- Use a red pen to mark where they usually cut
- Put the self-harm aside for a minute, then another etc. until the desire passes
- Remind them about the things they do well or help them to learn something new together, like playing guitar or making crafts
- Write a list of all the things that make you proud of your child and that make them special, and giving it to them. Try to focus on things about their personality rather than things like their academic achievements
- Listening to music
- Keeping a journal (for example 'Spectrum' self-help journal)
- Look at self-help websites and Apps (for example 'CalmHarm')
- Writing poetry
- Talk to a trusted person
- Take a bath or shower
- Exercise
- Watch a favourite funny film
- Contact a helpline



change

is

difficult.

not

changing

is

fatal.

*“Changes in my life helped me to stop self-harming”*

## Additions to your medicine cabinet

If self-harmers' wounds are not treated properly, they are at risk of getting an infection. Cuts can become infected if they use a non-sterile or dirty cutting instrument. If you are worried about a wound getting infected, or you are not sure how to look after it, you should seek medical attention. Wounds should be checked by a doctor even if further treatment for self-harming is not wanted. There is also a risk of permanent scarring from cuts and wounds. Death is also a potential danger.

It is important that you do not try to set ultimatums about your child's self-harm; your child needs to feel supported. We believe that in order to show support for your child, the best thing you can do is provide a first aid kit. This first aid kit will help them continue to self-harm but in a safe manner.

By providing a first aid kit, your child will appreciate that you understand they need time to work things out at their own pace. It also puts your mind at rest, because you will know that you have provided sterile and safe equipment to prevent infection.

We recommend the following items for the first aid kit for your child to be safe:

- Cotton Wool Pads
- Adhesive Wound Dressings
- Antiseptic Wipes
- Eye Wash
- Steri-Strips
- Antiseptic Cream
- Stretch Bandages
- It might be useful to have a contacts card in the first aid kit listing important phone number such as Service Six, REACH Collaboration or CAMHS Connect etc.

While we did not include sterilised blades in our example first aid kit, you may also wish to include these. They will help prevent infection, thus aiding in keeping your child safe. You can purchase sterilised blades from most pharmacy stores.

## **DON'TS** and **DO'S**

Ignoring a friend or family member's cutting and self-harm may help reinforce the feeling of shame surrounding the behaviour. A lack of communication can also increase their feelings of isolation and alienation.

### **DO'S**

You can help create change just by talking, but many family members find it difficult to know what to say. Ask questions such as:

- "How long have you been hurting yourself?"
- "How do you hurt yourself?"
- "How often do you injure yourself?"
- "Do you want to change your self-injury behaviour?"
- "How can I help you?"

### **DON'T**

- Keep asking questions if the self-injurer does not wish to talk about their cutting or self-harm. It may cause further alienation and make them feel even more alone and isolated.
- Tell an individual to not injure him or herself, this is their way of coping, a final attempt to relieve emotional pain, and they will continue to hurt themselves as long as they feel it's necessary. Telling them not to will just make them hide it more.
- Try to impose limits, this may increase self-harming behaviour in order for them to feel as if they have control over the situation.

***"I was worried that if people found out I was a self-harmer they would think I was attention seeking"***

## Useful Contacts

**The REACH Collaboration** - a partnership between five Youth Counselling organisations based in Northamptonshire supporting young people to improve their emotional and mental wellbeing.

**W: [reachyouthcounselling.org.uk](http://reachyouthcounselling.org.uk)**

- **Service Six**
- **CHAT Youth Counselling**
- **The lowdown**
- **Time 2 Talk**
- **Youth Works Northamptonshire**

**W: [servicesix.co.uk](http://servicesix.co.uk)**

**W: [chatyouthcounselling.org.uk](http://chatyouthcounselling.org.uk)**

**W: [thelowdown.info](http://thelowdown.info)**

**W: [time2talk.org.uk](http://time2talk.org.uk)**

**W: [youthworksnorthamptonshire.org.uk](http://youthworksnorthamptonshire.org.uk)**

**CAMHS Live** - Child and Adolescence Mental Health service to support children and young people up to the age of 18 who are experiencing difficulties with their emotional wellbeing and mental health difficulties.

**W: [nhft.nhs.uk/camhslive](http://nhft.nhs.uk/camhslive)**

**Selfharm.co.uk** - a project dedicated to supporting young people impacted by self-harm, providing a safe space to talk, ask any questions and be honest about what's going on in your life.

**W: [selfharm.co.uk](http://selfharm.co.uk)**

**British Red Cross** - Full of information about basic and advanced first aid and staying safe.

**W: [redcross.org.uk](http://redcross.org.uk)**

**Samaritans** - provides confidential emotional support 24/7 to those experiencing despair, distress or suicidal feelings.

**T: 08457909090 W: [samaritans.org.uk](http://samaritans.org.uk)**

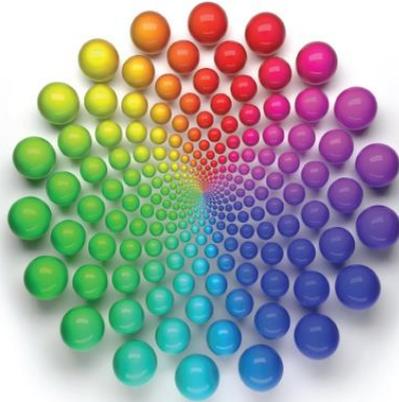
**Child Line** - a free helpline and online service for children and young people in the UK.

**T: 0800 1111 W: [childline.org.uk](http://childline.org.uk)**

**Changing Faces** - to support anyone with a permanent disfigurement whether as a result of an accident, self-harm or birth defect.

**W: [changingfaces.org.uk](http://changingfaces.org.uk)**

The resources developed are suitable for a wide range of people and each resource can be used according to individual circumstances.



Service Six

Changing Lives • Creating Futures

