

Helping parents understand self-harm

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The national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide in Scotland


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It can be difficult to find out that someone you care about is harming themselves. As a parent or carer you may feel angry, shocked, guilty and upset. These reactions are normal, but what the person you care about really needs is support from you.

The person needs you to stay calm and listen to them. The reason someone self-harms is to help them cope with very difficult feelings that build up and cannot be expressed. The person needs to find a less harmful way of coping.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is any behaviour such as self-cutting, swallowing objects, taking an overdose, hanging or running in front of a car where the intent is to deliberately cause harm to themselves.

How common is self-harm?

Over the past 40 years, there has been a large increase in the number of young people who harm themselves. A large community study found that among 15 to 16-year-olds, approximately ten per cent had self-harmed in the previous year.


Is it just attention-seeking?

Some people who self-harm have a desire to kill themselves. However, many other factors lead people to self-harm, including a desire to escape, to reduce tension, to express hostility, to make someone feel guilty or to increase caring from others.

Even if the young person does not intend to complete suicide, self-harming behaviour may express a strong sense of despair and needs to be taken seriously. It is not just attention-seeking behaviour.

Why do young people harm themselves?

All sorts of upsetting events can trigger self-harm, such as arguments with family, the break-up of a relationship, failing exams and bullying at school. Sometimes, several stresses happen



over a short period of time and one more incident is the final straw.

Young people who have emotional or behavioural problems or low self-esteem can be particularly at risk from self-harm. Suffering bereavement or serious rejection can also increase the risk. Sometimes, young people try to escape their problems by taking drugs or alcohol. This only makes the situation worse. For some people, self-harm is a desperate attempt to show others that something is wrong in their lives.

What you can you do to help:

- Keep an open mind.
- Make the time to listen.
- Help the person find different ways of coping
- Go with the person to get the right kind of help as quickly as possible.

Some people you can contact for help, advice and support:

- Your family doctor (GP)
- Young Minds: ☎ 0808 802 5544
🌐 www.youngminds.org.uk/for_parents

Useful websites:

- See Me Scotland 🌐 www.seemescotland.org.uk/findoutmore/aboutmentalhealthproblemsandstigma/selfharm
- Young Scot 🌐 www.youngscot.org/info/453-self-harm-getting-help
- Look OK Feel Crap 🌐 www.lookokfeelcrap.org/feeling-crap/self-harm
- The site.org 🌐 www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm

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