

Choose Life

Choose Life is the Scottish Government's national strategy and action plan to prevent suicide in Scotland. As well as national initiatives such as the "SEE ME" campaign and Breathing Space, each local authority was awarded money to ensure that the implementation of this national strategy would happen at a grass roots level.*

The strategy can be viewed in full at www.chooselife.net

What's the harm?

What is self harm?

Self harm is when someone deliberately hurts themselves as a way of coping with overwhelming emotional distress. Some people might only self-harm once others might regularly self harm over a period of weeks, months or years. Most of the time when people self harm they don't intend to kill themselves, but are actually harming themselves as a means to stay alive, to survive, to feel real, and to release their pain.

There are times though when someone may feel unable to cope with their pain or circumstances any longer and may think about suicide as a way of escaping their feelings. This may mean that they attempt suicide and this is different from the majority of self harm because it is intended to cause death.

In what ways do people self harm?

Self harm can be any kind of behaviour that directly causes pain or injury to your own body. We consider some forms of self harm to be ordinary and acceptable like smoking, drinking to excess after a hard day. Other forms of self harm like cutting, burning, or overdosing seem to be more shocking but they provide an escape and release for painful feelings in much the same way. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but shows us how wide ranging self harming behaviours can be.

What's the harm?

Telephone Helplines

The Samaritans: [0141-116-123](tel:0141-116-123) or [0845 7909192](tel:0845-7909192)

ChildLine Scotland: [0800 1111](tel:0800-1111)

Breathing Space: [0800 838 587](tel:0800-838-587)

Web-Sites

Self Harm: You are not the only one!

www.lifesigns.org.uk

National Self Harm Network: www.nshn.co.uk

Self Injury and Related Issues: www.siari.co.uk

There are too many useful web-sites, books and phone numbers to list here, but these should get you started.

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Useful Local Contacts

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper designed for handwriting practice. It features a series of horizontal lines. At the top, there are three solid blue lines. Below these is a single dashed blue line. The remainder of the page consists of multiple solid black lines spaced evenly apart, providing a guide for letter height and placement.

- Substance misuse
- Eating disorders
- Dangerous and unwanted sex
- Isolating oneself
- Staying in abusive relationships
- Gambling / addictions
- Overspending
- Mis-using or not taking prescribed medications
- Dangerous / Risk taking behaviours
- Under / overworking
- Being selfless
- Cutting – razor blades / knives
- Burning / Scalding the skin
- Limbs / Genital disfiguration
- Trichotillomania (hair pulling)
- Inserting sharp / foreign objects into orifices or under the skin/
- Swallowing harmful substances and objects

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Why do people self harm?

Self harming can be a way of coping with unbearable emotional pain. It may be in relation to difficult things that are happening in their lives right now, but often there are underlying, longer-term reasons for what they feel and do connected to painful events in the past. These painful experiences will have been hard to cope with at the time or are hard to cope with because they leave the person feeling powerless, bad about themselves, (even if they have done nothing wrong) alone, hurt and betrayed in some way. This makes it very hard for the person to be able to talk to people about how they feel, and for other people to understand why they are behaving in this way. The sorts of experiences which may underly self harm could include:

- Child sexual abuse
- Violence at home
- Neglect
- Emotional abuse
- Loss and bereavement
- Bullying
- Isolation and lack of support

- Value your own feelings – whatever they are they deserve your attention.
- Know your limitations – and as far as possible communicate them as this can avoid creating false expectations.
- Create and maintain boundaries – having good boundaries protects you and the person who is self harming from what can become an unhealthy rescuing relationship.
- Be aware of your needs and try not to confuse them with the needs of the person you are caring for.
- Arm yourself with the facts – read relevant literature, attend training days and support groups.
- Don't personalise it! The persons' self harming behaviours are about them, not you.
- Seek support, information and advice from people who have had experience of working with or supporting people who self harm.

It is important to recognise that caring for someone who is self-harming can be extremely stressful and we must not overlook the importance of self-care at this time.

How you feel will depend very much upon the relationship you have with the individual as much as your level of understanding and experience of self-harming behaviours. Initially you may be frightened and anxious, and if following your interventions the individual continues to injure themselves you may find you can become angry or annoyed with them. People who self harm often say that they feel very alone with their self-harm, and it is not unusual for carers to feel alone with their worries and frustrations.

In order to avoid becoming negative or bogged down with the issues there are things you can do to help you remain grounded and a source of positive support.

Talk through your feelings and concerns with someone you can trust. If you are a professional worker this may be your supervisor or colleagues.

How does self harm help people cope?

A lot of people who self injure talk about feeling angry, out of control, worthless, self-hating, guilty, and afraid prior to self harming. Afterwards they feel much calmer and safer. Here are some of the things that people say they get from self harming.

- Expressing and getting rid of anger
- Distraction from painful feelings
- Dealing with feelings of guilt shame and self-hatred
- Gaining a sense of control over something in ones own life
- A way of bringing oneself back from numbness
- Lets others know how you feel when words don't work or seem useless.
- A way of gaining comfort and filling the emptiness inside.

The things that people get from self harm that help them to cope and survive are all things that they should have, and are entitled to but perhaps don't know how to get in other ways at this time.

Helpful Responses to Self Harm

When someone you know and care about, or are working with in a caring capacity discloses self harm, or you become aware of it for the first time it can be quite frightening. Your first instinct may be to want to try and stop the person from harming themselves, and although this is understandable it is unlikely that they will find this supportive and it may deter them from being open with you in future.

The best response is a human response, and as far as possible try to be as honest and open as you can.

Ask the person what they want and need don't assume!

Accept that self-injury may be a way of coping and surviving for them

Accept the person how they are and where they are now at this point in time.

Listen – the most that someone may want is that you offer a listening ear.

Tell them what you can and cannot do and if you work for an organisation that has a **confidentiality** policy explain it in full.

Give advice with regards to appropriate first aid and medical treatment.

Encourage them to express their feelings and seek appropriate help and support.

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Share any concerns you have in relation to the risk they may be to themselves and talk them through.

Stay grounded! As far as possible try not to be reactionary, and remember that by choosing to talk about their self-harm the individual is making a positive choice for him or herself.

Remind the person that they have choices and promote autonomy.

It is important to remember this is written in relation to self-injury that is not life threatening, and where the individual has no intention to end their life. If you are concerned that someone you are working with or caring for may be suicidal then you should take appropriate action which may include referring them to a doctor or mental health professional either with, or without their permission to ensure their safety, and protect yourself. If you are a professional refer to your organisations policies and procedures with respect to this.

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