

Self-harm information for young people

chooselife

The national strategy and action plan
to prevent suicide in Scotland

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your way to a brighter future

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What is self-harm?

Self-harm is where someone does something to deliberately hurt themselves. This may include cutting parts of the body, burning, hitting or taking an overdose.

How many young people self-harm?


A large study in the UK found that about seven per cent (seven out of every 100) of 15 to 16-year-olds had self-harmed in the past year.

Why do young people self-harm?

Self-harm is often a way of trying to cope with painful and confusing feelings. Difficult things that people who self-harm talk about include:

- Feeling sad or feeling worried.
- Not feeling very good or confident about themselves.
- Being hurt by others: physically, sexually or emotionally.
- Feeling under a lot of pressure at school or at home.
- Losing someone close, such as someone dying or leaving.

When difficult or stressful things happen in a person's life, it can trigger self-harm. Upsetting events that might lead to self-harm include:

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- Arguments with family or friends.
 - Break-up of a relationship.
 - Failing, or thinking you are going to fail.
 - Being bullied.


Often, these things build up until the young person feels they cannot cope anymore.

Self-harm can be a way of trying to deal with, or escaping from these difficult feelings. It can also be a way of the person showing other people that something is wrong in their life.

How can you cope with self-harm?

Replacing the self-harm with other, safer, coping strategies can be a positive and more helpful way of dealing with difficult things in your life. Helpful strategies can include:

- Finding someone to talk to about your feelings, such as a friend or family member.
- Talking to someone on the phone – for example, you might want to call a helpline.
- Writing and drawing about your feelings, because sometimes it can be hard to talk about feelings.
- Scribbling on and/or ripping up paper.
- Listening to music.
- Going for a walk, run or other kind of exercise.

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- Getting out of the house and going somewhere where there are other people.
 - Keeping a diary.
 - Having a bath and/or using relaxing oils – for example, lavender.
 - Hitting a pillow or other soft object.
 - Watching a favourite film.

Children and young people involved in self-harm and suicide

Getting help

In the longer term, it is important that you learn to understand and deal with the causes of stress that you feel. The support of someone who understands and will listen to you can be very helpful in facing difficult feelings:

- At home: parents, brother/sister or another family member you trust.
- In school: pastoral care teacher, subject teacher, learning assistant, pupil and family support worker, other member of staff.
- GP: you can talk to your family doctor (GP) about your difficulties and they can make a referral for further help.




Helplines:

- Samaritans: ☎ 08457 90 90 90
- Childline Scotland: ☎ 0800 1111
- NSPCC: ☎ 0808 800 5000

My friend has a problem: how can I help?

- You can really help by just being there, listening and giving support.
- Be open and honest. If you are worried about your friend's safety, you should tell an adult. Let your friend know you are going to do this and you are doing it because you care about them.
- Encourage your friend to get help. You can go with your friend or tell someone your friend won't mind knowing about it.
- Get information from telephone helplines, websites or the library. This can help you understand what your friend is experiencing.
- Your friendship may be changed by the problem. You may feel bad that you can't help your friend enough or guilty if you have had to tell other people. These feelings are common and don't mean that you have done something wrong or not done enough.
- Your friend may get angry with you or tell you that you don't understand. It is important to try



not to take this personally. Often, when people are feeling bad themselves, they get angry with the people they are closest to.

- It can be difficult to look after someone who is having difficulties. It is important for you to talk to an adult who can support you. You may not always be able to be there for your friend, and that's okay.

Adapted with permission from Oxfordshire Adolescent Self-Harm Forum 2002

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