

Self-Harming



As a parent or carer it can be frightening to discover that your child or young person has harmed themselves on purpose. There are two main reasons that young people self-harm;

- As a way to manage strong and overwhelming emotions
- A way of reconnecting with life or their body.

Self-harm is not uncommon – a recent survey showed about 22% of young people aged 15 said they had self-harmed.

Why is my child self-harming?

Some use it as a way of coping when they are overwhelmed by difficult emotions. They may say that the harm they cause themselves releases some of the 'pressure' they feel inside them for a short time. The pain they feel will release hormones (endorphins) and this can give them some relief from their feelings briefly.

There are many things that may make a person use self-harm as a way to try and cope. Self-harm is not 'deliberate' or attention seeking. It is a symptom that a person is struggling with emotional pain. They need help to find better ways to cope.

Signs of self-harm

Some signs that a person is self harming might include;

- Unexplained bruises, cuts or burns often on the inside of wrists, arms, tops of thighs or chest. You might find blood stained tissues and dressings.
- Keeping covered up regardless of the weather.
- Signs of low mood, such as tearfulness, losing interest in normal activities, not seeing friends as much. They may be low on confidence and self esteem.
- Being more secretive and withdrawn from family and friends.
- Beginning to misuse drugs or alcohol.
- They might talk about self-harm on social media or visit websites about self-harm.

Some of the ways young people might self-harm are;

- Cutting, burning, pinching, scratching and biting.
- Hair pulling (trichotillomania).
- Head banging.
- Poisoning Drinking harmful chemicals, swallowing objects other than food or drink.
- Hitting or slapping themselves. Bone breaking, punching walls, starting fights.
- Picking at wounds or re-opening wounds.
- Multiple piercing or tattooing (may also be a type of self-injury, especially if pain or stress relief is a factor).
- Risky behaviours.
- If young people use alcohol or drugs they are more likely to self harm.

What do I do if I'm worried?

If at any point you are worried that your young person has done something to seriously harm themselves then call either 111 or 999.

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Things you can do:

If you have just discovered your child is self harming you probably feel confused, scared and upset. You may not be sure what to do next. It can be a good idea to give yourself a few minutes to breathe slowly and feel calm before you react. Being as calm as you can, will help your child and you. You will probably have lots of questions and want your child to promise to stop. You might want to remove anything they might use to hurt themselves. However your child has been using the harm as a way to cope with distress. Taking their (unhealthy) coping strategy away before they have been able to develop new healthy ways to manage feelings can make things harder for your child and may not work. Ask your child what they think would help.

Giving your child time to talk about what has been happening and think why and when they have used self harm is likely to help them most.

Many people who self-harm will say they feel embarrassed and ashamed about what they are doing. Reassuring them that it is not uncommon and they can get better, will be really helpful to them. If your child feels they can talk to you and do not have to keep it a secret you will be more able to keep them safe.

Help your child to come up with other things to try when they feel the urge to self harm;

They could try and distract themselves with - colouring, listening to music, writing, poetry and art. Watching a film together or going for a walk.

Let them know they can come to you and you will help them through the dark moments. Be with them and help them try breathing exercises to relax until the urge passes.

Encourage them to avoid websites that 'normalise' self-harm.

Make sure they know basic wound care - how to keep it clean and when to seek further medical support.

Eating well, resting and getting exercise will all help them build their strength up and improve well being.

Look at a wellbeing action plan together or they may prefer to look alone.

Remember to take care of yourself too. It is not easy to support your child when they are struggling with self-harm. Talk to trusted family and friends. Use relaxation techniques and care for your own health and wellbeing.

Getting More Help

When people are self-harming it is always a sign of emotional distress that needs support. Your child should see their GP for an assessment of what might help them most. Talking to your child's school can help widen your child's support network too.

Letting other people know will help you and your child get the support they need. They may want you to be there for support or find it easier to talk without you there - ask them what would help the most.

If you are worried that your child has injuries needing immediate medical attention call 111 or 999. The NHS give more information about seeking urgent help [*here*](#).

Who Can Help?

You can contact the Healthy Child Programme by calling Just One Number on 0300 300 0123 or texting Parentline on 07520631590. Our opening hours are 8am-6pm Monday-Friday (excluding bank holidays) and 9am-1pm on Saturdays.

If you are 11-19 you can text Chathealth on 07480635060 for confidential advice from one of our team.

For 11-25 year olds Kooth is a free, confidential and safe way to receive online counselling, advice and emotional well-being support.

Childline - Children and young people under 19 can call 0800 1111 for free support.

Young Minds Parents Helpline - Call 0808 802 5544 for free Mon-Fri from 9.30am to 4pm.

It may also be helpful to speak to the young person's head of year or a teacher with pastoral responsibility so they can offer further support in school.

To speak to other Norfolk parents and carers, you can join our online community forum below.