



Understanding self-harm

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SAMH

Scottish Action for Mental Health



This booklet is for anyone who self-harms, and their friends and family. It explains what self-harm is, the reasons for it and how to go about making changes. It includes self-help ideas and information about other forms of support.

Since 1923, SAMH has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

CONTENTS

What is self-harm?	4
Why do people harm themselves?	6
How can I help myself now?	8
How can I help myself in the future?	13
What support and treatment is available?	17
What can friends and family do to help?	22
Useful contacts	25



WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences that feel out of control. It can be the thing people turn to when they feel they have no other option.

Some people have described self-harm as a way to:

- express something that is hard to put into words
- turn invisible thoughts or feelings into something visible
- change emotional pain into physical pain
- reduce overwhelming emotional feelings or thoughts
- have a sense of being in control
- escape traumatic memories
- have something in life that they can rely on
- punish themselves for their feelings and experiences
- stop feeling numb, disconnected or dissociated
- create a reason to physically care for themselves
- express suicidal feelings and thoughts without taking their own life.

Even though there are always reasons underneath someone hurting themselves, it is important to know that self-harm does carry risks. Once you have started to depend on self-harm, it can take a long time to stop.

“Self-harm proved to me I was real, I was alive. At times it also silenced the chaos in my head, briefly pausing the repetitive flashbacks and body memories.”

How do people self-harm?

There are lots of different forms of self-harming. Some people use the same one all the time, other people hurt themselves in different ways at different times.

Warning

It can be upsetting and potentially triggering to read information about how to self-harm. If you are feeling vulnerable at the moment, you might not want to read the following section.

“I think one of my biggest barriers to getting help was actually not admitting to myself that I had a problem. I used to tell myself, ‘I’m only scratching, it’s not real self-harm’.”

Ways of self-harming can include:

Some people have described self-harm as a way to:

- cutting yourself
- poisoning yourself
- over-eating or under-eating
- biting yourself
- picking or scratching at your skin
- burning your skin
- inserting objects into your body
- hitting yourself or walls
- overdosing
- exercising excessively
- pulling your hair
- getting into fights where you know you will get hurt.

After self-harming, you might feel better and more able to cope for a while. However, the cause of your distress is unlikely to have gone away. Self-harm can also bring up very difficult emotions and could make you feel worse.

If you self-harm, it is important that you know how to look after your injuries and that you have access to the first aid equipment you need. Lifesigns has information on first aid for self-injury and self-harm (see *'Useful contacts'* on p.25).

WHY DO PEOPLE HARM THEMSELVES?

There are no fixed rules about why people self-harm. It really can be very different for everyone.

For some people, self-harm is linked to specific experiences and is a way of dealing with something that's either happening at the moment or which happened in the past. For others, the reasons are less clear and can be harder to make sense of.

Sometimes you might not know why you hurt yourself. If you don't understand the reasons for your self-harm, you are not alone and you can still ask for help.

Any difficult experience can cause someone to self-harm. Common reasons include:

- pressures at school or work
- bullying
- money worries
- sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- bereavement
- confusion about your sexuality
- breakdown of a relationship
- loss of a job
- an illness or health problem
- low self-esteem

- an increase in stress
- difficult feelings, such as depression, anxiety, anger or numbness.

Self-harm can be a response to any situation or pressure with the potential to affect someone. Some people find that certain actions, such as drinking alcohol or taking drugs, increase the likelihood of self-harm, or that self-harm is more likely to happen at certain times (at night, for example).

Sometimes people talk about self-harm as attention-seeking. If people make comments like this, it can leave you feeling judged and alienated. In reality, a lot of people keep their self-harm private, and it can be painful to have your behaviour misunderstood in this way.

However, if you do self-harm as a way of bringing attention to yourself, remember that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be noticed and to have your distress acknowledged and taken seriously. You also deserve a respectful response from those around you, including medical professionals.

“I started self-harming when I was 15 or 16. I can’t remember why I decided to start, but that’s what I did.”

Who self-harms?

Self-harm is something that anyone can do, there is no one typical person who hurts themselves.

The age when people first self-harm ranges from four years old to people in their 60s.

Emergency services receive more self-harm related calls from women than men – however, research suggests that men are equally likely to hurt themselves but face greater cultural barriers to reaching out and asking for help.

While anyone can self-harm, difficult experiences that can result in self-harm relate more to some people than others. Exam stress, classroom bullying and peer pressure is something that affects a lot of young people, for example. Questions and confusion about sexual orientation are more common for members of the LGBTQ community, and money worries can create greater stress for those on a lower income.

These specific pressures, along with discrimination and stigma, can lead to increased tension which may in turn make self-harm more likely.

“I’ve learnt that, as my emotional needs were not being met, I used self-harm because I didn’t know how to express myself or say what I needed or wanted. A part was also for attention, I was desperate for someone to notice me and help me.”

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF NOW?

During intense urges to hurt yourself, it can be hard to imagine that it's possible to do anything else.

There are steps you can take to help you make other choices over time:

- **understanding your patterns of self-harm**
- **distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm**
- **delaying self-harm.**

Understanding your patterns of self-harm

Understanding your patterns of self-harm can help you to work out what gives you the urge to self-harm, and recognise when the urge is coming on. Remember, even when you are unable to resist the urge to self-harm, it is helpful to reflect afterwards on what happened. This will enable you to better understand the next time you have similar feelings.



Try breaking down your experience into the following:

Learn to recognise triggers

Triggers are what give you the urge to hurt yourself. They can be people, situations, anniversaries, sensations, specific thoughts or feelings.

Practice noting down what was happening just before you self-harmed.

- Did you have particular thoughts?
- Did a situation, person or object remind you of something difficult?

Become aware of the urge to self-harm

Urges can include physical sensations like:

- racing heart or feelings of heaviness
- strong emotions like sadness or anger
- a disconnection from yourself or a loss of sensation
- repetitive thoughts – for example, 'I'm going to cut'
- unhealthy decisions, like working too hard to avoid feelings.

Recognising your urges helps you take steps towards reducing or stopping self-harm. Try writing down what you notice about your urges, to help you spot them more quickly each time they come.

Identify distractions

Distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm is a way of giving yourself more breathing space and reducing the intensity of the urge. It can be done when you feel the urge, or as soon as you become aware that you are hurting yourself.

“I learned distraction techniques. My favourite one was my Positivity Book, which is kind of like a scrap book filled with things which make me happy.”

Diary

One way to help yourself understand your self-harming behaviour is to keep a diary of what happens before, during and after each time you self-harm. It is helpful to do this over a period of time (like a month) so you can start to see patterns. This can be quite an intense experience and can bring up difficult feelings.

If you feel confident to try this on your own, make sure you do something relaxing or enjoyable afterwards. If you find doing this distressing, you may want to ask for support from someone you trust.

Distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm

The main way people help themselves when they want to self-harm is through distraction. Different distractions work for different people, and the same distraction won't necessarily work for you every time. For example, distracting yourself from anger feels very different to distracting yourself from fear, so it's important that you have a few different strategies to choose from.

The following are simply suggestions. See if you can write your own table of distractions that you've found helpful or that you would like to try out.

Feelings

Anger and frustration

Possible distractions

- exercise
- hit cushions
- shout and dance
- shake
- bite on bunched up material
- tear something up into hundreds of pieces
- go for a run.

Expressing your anger physically, or by doing things like shouting, won't work for everyone and could intensify feelings. Try things out and continue with any that have a positive effect.

Feelings

Possible distractions

Sadness and fear

- wrap a blanket around you
- spend time with an animal
- walk in nature
- let yourself cry or sleep
- listen to soothing music
- tell someone how you feel
- massage your hands
- lie in a comfortable position and breathe in – then breathe out slowly, making your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Repeat until you feel more relaxed.

Need to control

- write lists
- tidy up
- have a throw-out
- write a letter saying everything you are feeling, then tear it up
- weed a garden
- clench then relax all your muscles.

Numb and disconnected

- flick elastic bands on your wrists
- hold ice cubes
- smell something with a strong odour
- have a very cold shower.

Shame

- stop spending time with anyone who treats you unkindly
- recognise when you are trying to be perfect and accept that making mistakes is part of being human
- remind yourself that there are reasons for how you behave – it is not because you are 'bad'.

Feelings**Self-hatred –
wanting to punish
yourself****Possible distractions**

- write a letter from the part of you that feels the self-hatred, then write back with as much compassion and acceptance as you can
- find creative ways to express the self-hatred, through writing songs or poetry, drawing, movement or singing
- do physical exercise (like running or going to the gym) to express the anger that is turned in on yourself.

For some people, distracting or delaying feels a far too simplistic approach to dealing with the complex and deep rooted nature of self-harm. In this case, 'How can I help myself in the future?' (see p.13) might feel more useful.

“I was determined to stop harming myself. On some occasions I literally sat on my hands until the urge had passed.”

“I hated my body and blamed it for what I’d been through, so felt it needed punishing. Learning to accept and respect [my body] was key to overcoming self-harm.”

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF IN THE FUTURE?

There are a number of ways to help yourself in the long term. They include a deeper exploration of the reasons why you self-harm, to help you find alternatives.

Accept your feelings

If you have been shamed for your feelings, or learnt to shut them down for any other reason, it is very brave to start to face them once more. It can feel very frightening to allow yourself to experience difficult emotions again, and it is important to go very slowly. Perhaps include tools like mindfulness or keep a journal to support and prevent you from becoming overwhelmed.

- Try some of the online tools, books and worksheets for understanding emotions (*the Self-injury Support website has resources on dealing with feelings – see 'Useful contacts' on p.25*).
- Work alongside a therapist who you trust, to have a positive experience of your feelings being accepted and validated.
- Try the mindfulness technique of noticing and naming feelings as you become aware of them.

Build your self-esteem

Learning to value yourself and perceive yourself positively makes a big difference to your experience in life.

- Practice speaking and thinking more kindly about yourself, in the same way as you would about a loved one.
- Replace repetitive mental urges to hurt yourself with empowered thoughts – for example, 'Even though I feel like cutting, I am going to find another way to express how upset I feel.'
- Regularly write down three things you appreciate about yourself, no matter how small.
- Learn to be assertive by expressing boundaries of what does and doesn't feel right for you in your life.
- Take control of your decisions. Remind yourself that you have responsibility for the choices you make in life, and choose things that feel supportive and nourishing for you.

“I think the best way to stop self-harm is to focus on the underlying issues which trigger you to do it. If you work on these issues, then the self-harm will stop naturally.”

Look after your general wellbeing

Taking care of your health on all levels can help you feel a lot better about yourself.

- Doing regular physical activity can boost your mood and reduce stress.
- Eating regular meals with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables can also help with how you feel.
- Making sure you get enough sleep helps you feel better and more able to cope.
- Doing something creative can help you express your feelings. For example, write a song, story or blog, paint, draw or use clay.
- Spending time every week doing things that you enjoy, such as seeing friends or going for a walk, is also important. Try to make time to do this, no matter what else is going on.



Understand your self-harm in more detail

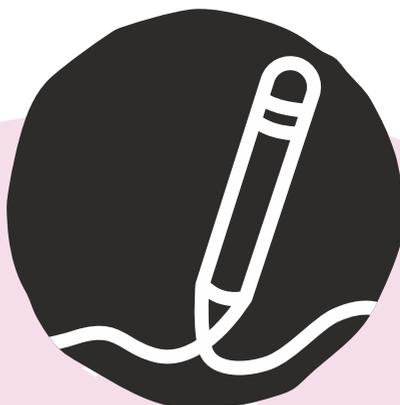
Letting go of self-harm can feel like a really big decision that takes time to make. It can be very helpful to understand your relationship to it in more depth, so that you can put things in place to support the process. The more you understand about why you hurt yourself, and the function that self-harm has had for you, the better equipped you will be to make changes and put effective alternatives in place.

The following questions can help you begin the process of understanding your self-harm:

- How do you feel before and after you hurt yourself?
- What was the reason why you hurt yourself the first time?
- What does self-harm give you now?
- What are the situations where you are most likely to want to hurt yourself?
- What are your fears about living without self-harm?
- What would you miss about self-harm?
- What else would be useful to understand about your self-harm?

For more guidance on supporting yourself to stop self-harming see Self-injury Support information sheets, Lifesigns information on alternatives, and the Harmless guide to working through self-harm (see 'Useful contacts' on p.25).

“I was able to start channelling my feelings into creativity. This gave me an outlet to build a better relationship with myself, and I was able to occupy my hands when feeling really bad until the urge to self-harm had subsided.”



Reach out for support

Reaching out can feel hard, especially if you worry that people will judge you or you believe other people might not want to help you. Remind yourself that everyone needs support at different times, and that it is OK to ask for help.

When you are ready to reach out, choose someone who you trust to talk to about how you are feeling. This could be a friend, family member, counsellor or health professional (see *'What support and treatment is available?'* on p.17 for more information).

Remember that you are in control of what you say, and you don't have to say anything that you're not ready to share yet.

“Having a therapist who would never judge and remained constant and calm made a huge difference in me being able to open up.”

You may also find it helpful to write a list of all the people, organisations and websites that you can go to for help when you are finding things difficult. This will remind you that you are not alone, and where you can get help. (See *'Useful contacts'* on p.25.)

There is no magic solution or quick fix for self-harm, and making changes can take time and involve periods of difficulty. It is common to make some progress and then get back into old behaviours again. If this happens to you, remind yourself that it's not failing – it is simply part of the process.



WHAT SUPPORT AND TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

Sometimes outside support is needed to help you make positive changes.

You may need to try a few different things to find what works for you, and combine self-help techniques with professional support:

- GP
- talking therapies
- support groups
- online support
- treatment for scars.

Your right to help and support

It takes courage to ask for support. It is understandable that you may have concerns that you won't be understood or that you will be pressured to make changes faster than you want to. However, you have the right to receive support that is both empowering and respectful.

Any health professional – such as your GP or psychiatrist – should discuss all your options with you, and your views and preferences should be taken into account when making decisions about your treatment. If you receive NHS treatment, it should be in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines. These say that:

- any health professionals should treat you in a way that is sensitive and non-judgemental
- ideally, health professionals should be trained in communicating sensitively with people who self-harm and be aware of potential stigma
- any treatment you are given should be tailored to your individual needs.

“Visiting the GP was the best thing I have ever done. It didn’t immediately get better, but that’s where my recovery began.”



Support options include:

GP

Often a first step to asking for help and discussing your self-harm confidentially.

- Your GP may assess you and let you know about available treatment.
- Can prescribe medication for anxiety or depression, or to help with sleeping.
- Can refer to your CMHT (community mental health team) which can include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, an occupational therapist and community psychiatric nurse.
- If they are concerned that your self-harm is a threat to your life, or if you need medical treatment for your injuries, they may suggest you spend time in hospital.

Talking therapies

Talking with a professional therapist trained to listen with empathy and acceptance.

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) and Psychodynamic therapy have been shown to be helpful for people who self-harm.
- If you can afford to, you can pay to see a private, trained and accredited therapist. See BABCP, BACP, COSCA and UKCP for further details.

Support groups

Regular meetings with others who have similar experiences to you.

- Can be peer led or facilitated.
- May focus on specific issues or be more general.

Online support

A support option if you don't feel ready to see someone face to face.

- Email, text, information or forum support is offered by self-harm services – for example, National Self-Harm Network, Self-injury Support, Lifesigns, The Mix and Sane.
- The content on some self-harm sites can be triggering. Make sure the sites you visit are well moderated and that you know how to protect yourself and others while online.

Treatment for scars

- Some people feel that scars from self-harm are an important part of their journey, while others would prefer not to have them.
- Treatments are available for covering and reducing scarring. For more information see the Lifesigns pages on scar reduction and skin camouflage.

(See 'Useful contacts' on p.25 for further information.)

“I have received medical intervention for both deep wounds and overdoses and, although my treatment was pretty horrifying, it did save my life.”



Things to consider when asking for help

Remember that whoever is supporting you is there to help you and listen to you. Sometimes a therapist or practitioner may ask you to commit to not self-harm during a course of treatment. It is important that you don't feel pressured into making decisions about this, and that anything you decide is realistic for you at the time.

It can be tempting to try to cover up the extent of your self-harm, or to lie about it altogether. While this is understandable, if you are able to share your experience it can make a big difference to how you feel. It can help to reduce feelings of shame and isolation, and will increase the chance of you receiving the support you need. It does take a lot of courage to reach out, and it might take more than one conversation to say everything that you'd like to say.

If the person supporting you is not trained or experienced in self-harm, it might be useful to ask them to find out more – by reading these pages, for example, or by contacting an organisation for people who self-harm (*Self-injury Support, Lifesigns and Harmless have helpful information sheets – see 'Useful contacts' on p.25*). It can also help if you write down all the things that you'd like to say to the person in advance. This will help you if you feel anxious about expressing your feelings or worried that you might be judged.

If you are concerned about your treatment or care, or find it hard to access the support you need, it may be helpful to get an advocate to support you. This could be a friend, family member or professional. You can also contact PALS for information on making a complaint about NHS services if you need to (*see 'Useful contacts' on p.25*).

“Even when I’ve had to go to A&E, I have lied and pretended my injuries were accidents – which in hindsight is silly as I could have received some emotional support, but I hold such deep shame.”

WHAT CAN FRIENDS AND FAMILY DO TO HELP?

This section is for friends and family members who want to support someone they know who self-harms.

Finding out that someone you care about self-harms

Whether someone tells you directly, or you suspect that someone is hurting themselves, it can be difficult to know what to say and how best to approach the situation. You might feel shocked, angry, helpless, responsible or any number of other difficult emotions.

- Try not to panic or overreact. The way you respond to your friend or family member will have an impact on how much they open up to you and other people about their self-harm in the future.
- Remember that self-harm is usually someone's way of managing very hard feelings or experiences, and that in the majority of cases it is different to suicidal feelings.

What helps?

There are lots of things you can do to make a difference to someone you know who self-harms. Your attitude and how you relate to them is one of the key things that can help them feel supported.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Try to be non-judgemental.
- Let the person know that you are there for them.
- Relate to them as a whole person, not just their self-harm.
- Try to have empathy and understanding about what they are doing.
- Let them be in control of their decisions.
- Offer to help them find support.
- Remind them of their positive qualities and things they do well.
- Try to have honest communication, where you take responsibility for any fears you have.

“Having friends I could ring up and talk to about everyday things gave me some respite from the despair.”

What doesn't help?

Sometimes, even with the best will in the world, attempts to support someone can backfire. Here are some potential pitfalls to watch out for:

- Trying to force change.
- Acting or communicating in a way that threatens to take control away from your loved one.
- Either ignoring their injuries or overly focusing on them.
- Labelling self-harm as 'attention seeking'.

Although it often isn't, self-harm can sometimes be a person's way of asking for attention. If so, it is important to remember that there is nothing wrong with wanting attention, and that deep distress can get in the way of someone's ability to be direct about what they need.

Take care of yourself

Supporting someone who is self-harming can be a long process with many ups and downs. Taking care of yourself will enable you to stay involved for longer and to keep well. See SAMH's resource *How to cope when supporting someone else* for more information.

Helpful things to put in place are:

- having clear boundaries about how much and what sort of support you can offer
- finding out what other support is available
- getting support and information for yourself – Young Minds offers support for parents, and Sane and Self-injury Support runs support services for people concerned about someone else's mental health (see '*Useful contacts*' on p.25). You may find it helpful to try a talking treatment if you are finding things difficult.

Supporting people to stay safe

It is common to feel scared about the possibility of someone seriously hurting themselves or even taking their own life. While it is understandable to have these fears, it is useful to remember that self-harm doesn't necessarily mean that someone wants to end their life.

There are, however, a small number of people who do go on to take their own lives, either intentionally or accidentally. It's therefore important to have an honest conversation with your friend or family member about staying safe – for example, being aware when things are getting too much and knowing when to seek help. See SAMH's web pages on suicide for more and the Samaritans website for more information (see *'Useful contacts'* on p.25).

They push me away or say things that upset me when they are unwell

You might find that they say or do upsetting things sometimes. It's easy to take difficult feelings out on the person you are closest to. They may push you away but get upset if you leave. They may find it harder to be patient or get angry more easily. They may even feel convinced that you are a threat to them in some way.



USEFUL CONTACTS

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

T: 01455 88 33 00

W: bacp.co.uk

Information about counselling and psychotherapy, and details of local therapists.

COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)

T: 01786 475140

W: cosca.org.uk

To find a counsellor or psychotherapist.

Elefriends

W: elefriends.org.uk

A friendly, supportive online community for people experiencing a mental health problem.

Give Us A Shout

T: 85258 (text only)

W: giveusashout.org

24/7 crisis text line.

Harmless

W: harmless.org.uk

User-led organisation for people who self-harm, and their friends and families.

Lifesigns

W: lifesigns.org.uk

User-led self-harm guidance and support network.

The Mix

T: 0808 808 4994

W: themix.org.uk/mental-health/self-harm

Helpline and online support for people aged 16–25.

National Self Harm Network (NSHN)

W: nshn.co.uk

Survivor-led closely monitored forum for people who self-harm, and their friends and families.

NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence)

W: nice.org.uk

Offers guidelines on treatments.

PALS (Patient advice and liaison service)

NHS department that supports service users to make complaints about their experience or treatment through the NHS. Further information on PALS can be found on NHS Choices: nhs.uk

Samaritans

T: 116 123
E: jo@samaritans.org
W: samaritans.org
Freepost: RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, Chris, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA
A free 24-hour telephone helpline.

Sane

T: 0300 304 7000
W: sane.org.uk
Support and information about mental health problems.

See Me

W: seemescotland.org
National programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination.

Self-injury Support

T: 0808 800 8088 (helpline)
T: 07537 432 444 (text support)
W: selfinjurysupport.org.uk
Support, resources and training for all.

YoungMinds

T: 0808 802 5544 (parent helpline)
W: youngminds.org.uk
Information for parents and young people about mental health and wellbeing.





“I hated my body and blamed it for what I’d been through, so felt it needed punishing. Learning to accept and respect [my body] was key to overcoming self-harm.”



@SAMHtweets



SAMHmentalhealth



@samhscotland

To read or print SAMH's information booklets visit **samh.org.uk**. If you require this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email **communications@samh.org.uk**

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