



UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM

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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.

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WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, old memories, or overwhelming situations and experiences. The ways you hurt yourself can be physical, such as cutting yourself. They can also be less obvious, such as putting yourself in risky situations, or not looking after your own physical or emotional needs.

Ways of self-harming can include:

- cutting yourself
- poisoning yourself
- over-eating or under-eating
- burning your skin
- inserting objects into your body
- hitting yourself or walls
- overdosing
- exercising excessively
- scratching and hair pulling.

After self-harming, you might feel better and more able to cope for a while. However, self-harm can bring up very difficult feelings and could make you feel worse.

If you self-harm, you may feel embarrassed or ashamed about it. You might be worried that other people will judge you or pressurise you to stop if you tell them about it. This may mean that you keep your self-harming a secret. This is a very common reaction, although not everyone does this.

WHY DO PEOPLE HARM THEMSELVES?

There are no fixed rules about why people self-harm. For some people, it can be linked to specific experiences, and be a way of dealing with something that is happening now, or that happened in the past. For others, it is less clear. If you don't understand the reasons for your self-harm, it's important to remind yourself that this is OK, and you don't need to know this in order to ask for help.

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

- pressures at school or work
- bullying
- money worries
- sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- bereavement
- confusion about your sexuality
- breakdown of relationships
- an illness or health problem
- difficult feelings, such as depression, anxiety, anger or numbness, experienced as part of a mental health problem.

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

- express something that is hard to put into words
- make experiences, thoughts or feelings that feel invisible 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
- stop feeling numb, disconnected or dissociated
- create a reason to physically care for yourself
- express suicidal feelings and thoughts without taking your own life (see SAMH's booklet *Suicide - Living with your thoughts*)
- communicate to other people that you are experiencing severe distress.

I used to cut myself just so I could feel pain. [It] let me know I was real and I wasn't in a dream.

I 'needed' to harm to punish myself for being what I believed then to be a terrible person and to clear the fog in my head. As soon as I did, I'd feel in control, calm and as though a reset button had been pressed in my head.

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, most people keep their self-harm private, and it can feel very painful to have your behaviour misunderstood in this way.

If you do self-harm as a way of bringing attention to yourself, remember that you deserve a respectful response from those around you, including from medical professionals.

I found that cleaning and dressing wounds or taking myself to A&E for sutures was the only time I was kind to myself.

HOW CAN I HELP MYSELF?

If you are thinking about stopping or reducing your self-harm, finding ways of helping yourself can feel very empowering.

This section gives some ideas for things you can do to support yourself better. Some can be done when you feel like self-harming. Others can be done at any time. You may need to try a few to find out what works for you. These techniques may be helpful on their own, or alongside professional help. (See 'What treatment and support is available?' on p.13)

There is hope, no matter how many times you...[have to]...pull yourself back up. Every day is a new day, and every day is a start to recovery and getting better.

If you do not feel able to stop self-harming completely, it is important to be honest with yourself and consider what else you can do that would feel helpful. For example, you may be able to work towards reducing or stopping your self-harm in the future, even if you find it too difficult to stop self-harming immediately.

Fifteen years of self-harm was my way of releasing the pain, releasing the lid on a screaming pressure cooker. It gave me tremendous relief. It's 20 years since then, because I learnt to cry, scream, give voice to pain, dance, laugh and sing.

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.

Work out your patterns of self-harm

It may be that things happen so fast, it feels impossible to realise you have an urge to self-harm before you find that you are hurting yourself.

Keeping a diary of what happens before, during and after each time you self-harm, can help you work out what gives you the urge to self-harm, and recognise when the urge is coming on. It is helpful to do this over a period of time – maybe a month – so that you start to see patterns.

Learn to recognise triggers

Your triggers are the things that give you the urge to hurt yourself. This could be anything from people, situations, anniversaries, certain times of the day, physical sensations or particular thoughts or feelings.

In your diary, note down what was happening before you last self-harmed. Did you have a particular thought? Did you have an argument? Did you have to see someone you don't like? Did a situation or object remind you of something difficult?

This can be quite an intense experience and bring up difficult feelings and emotions.

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 a trusted friend, family member, or professional. (See 'What treatment and support is available?' on p.13 for more information.)

Learn to recognise urges

The next step is to identify how you experience the urge to self-harm. Urges come in lots of different ways and may be different for you at different times.

Urges can include:

- physical sensations, such as a racing heart, nausea, or very shallow breath
- feelings of heaviness, fogginess or blackness
- disconnecting with yourself, such as feeling like you are outside of your own body or losing all feelings of sensation
- strong emotions, like sadness, fear, despair or rage
- specific thoughts, such as 'hurt' or 'I'm going to cut'
- making decisions that you know aren't good for you, for example by excessive working or exercising rather than experiencing your feelings.

I feel the urge when I have too much feeling inside me, whether anger, sadness or frustration, that I can't seem to contain it inside my mind. I think self-harming was my way of dealing with it.

If you are able to recognise your urges, this can help you take positive steps towards reducing or stopping your self-harm. You might also find it helpful to think about how your urges relate to your triggers.

Even at times when you are unable to resist the urge to self-harm, it is still helpful to think about what happened, so you understand this better next time.

Distract from the urge to self-harm

The urges were overwhelming and would make me panic and feel desperate. Focusing on a specific task such as washing my hands, making a cup of tea, folding clothes, or something destructive like tearing paper or hitting something helped the panic pass.

Distracting yourself is a way of changing the cycle of self-harm by choosing to do something else. A distraction, like hitting a cushion or writing a list, provides something else to focus on and another way of expressing your feelings.

This can help reduce the intensity of your urge to self-harm. Distracting can be done when you feel an urge to harm yourself, or as you become aware you are hurting yourself.

Once you know the different feelings and situations that cause you to want to self-harm (your triggers and urges), you can create a personal list of distractions. It is important to notice when a distraction works in one situation or with a certain feeling, but not in another. Then you can consider what you may need to do in different situations or for different urges.

On the next page, there is the beginning of a list of distractions for you to build on. Try to come up with five different things for each one of the feelings that causes you to want to self-harm. You can build this list up over time if you find it difficult to think of five things straight away.

Feelings	Possible distractions	Distractions that work for me
Anger and frustration	Express it physically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exercise in a way that feels helpful rather than harmful • Hit cushions • Shout • Dance • Shake • Bite on bunched up material • Tear something up into hundreds of pieces 	
Sadness and fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap a blanket round 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 deeply – then breathe out slowly, making your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Repeat until you feel more relaxed. 	
Need to control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write lists • Tidy up • Have a clear-out • Write a letter saying everything you are feeling and burn it • Weed a garden • Clench then relax all your muscles 	
Numb and disconnected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flick elastic bands on wrists • Hold ice cubes • Eat something with a strong taste like chilli or peppermint • Smell something with strong odour • Have a very cold shower 	

I use my art to cope, although it does not always work. I either draw very angry scribbling on big sheets of paper or use plasticine to get a lot of the energy out. I have only recently realised that a lot of the self-harm thoughts and feelings come from anger being directed inward.

Delay self-harm

Another technique is to wait ten minutes before you self-harm. If you still have the urge, then let yourself. If not, increase the time you wait to half an hour, a morning, a day, a week etc. By doing this, you slowly build up the gaps between each time you self-harm, and reduce how often you feel the need to do it. Even if you start self-harming again, you will now know that you can go for periods of time without doing so.

Other ways of making long term changes

It is also helpful to think about steps you can take to understand your self-harm and to find other ways of supporting yourself.

Build your self-esteem

Practising positive and encouraging self-talk can help make a difference to how you feel. As you experience urges to self-harm, try reminding yourself why you are having certain thoughts or feelings. For example: 'I feel like I want to cut because I don't think that person likes me'. Then replace it with another thought, like: 'Even though I feel like cutting, I am going to find another way to express how upset I feel'.

It can also help to explore personal beliefs about yourself and others by writing them down in a diary. For example, you may believe you will never be able to stop hurting yourself or that no one will be able to help you.



Ask yourself if you can be absolutely sure that these beliefs are true and how it would feel for you to let them go or change them. If you find this difficult, you may want to ask for support from a trusted friend, family member, or professional. (See 'What treatment and support is available?' on p.13.)

It might also be helpful to write down all the things you like about yourself, no matter how small. Try to do this on a regular basis, perhaps every week. This will help shift your attention from negative feelings to more positive ones, and help you build your self-esteem over time.

Look after your general wellbeing

Looking after yourself can help you feel more positive. For example:

- Doing regular physical activity can boost your mood and reduce stress. (See SAMH's booklet *Get Active*)
- Eating regular meals with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables can also help.
- 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.

Reach out for support

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

When you are ready to reach out, choose someone that you trust to talk to about how you are feeling. This could be a friend, a family member, a counsellor, health professional or psychologist (see 'What treatment and support is available?' p.13)

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.20)



WHAT TREATMENT AND SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

You might believe that it is impossible to stop self-harming if you have been doing it for a while. This isn't true. It can take time, effort and determination to stop, but lots of people have managed to do it.

Sometimes, you may need to get outside support to help you make positive changes. You may find that you need to try a few different things to find what works for you, and combine self-help techniques with professional support. (See 'How can I help myself?' on p.7)

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, it's important to remember 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.

There is light at the end of this tunnel. It's possible to change certain thought processes and to learn how to deal with things in a different way. The most important thing is to have a strong support network in place for when you're ready.

If you receive treatment on the NHS, it should be in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (see 'Useful contacts' on p.20).

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
- treatments offered may include structured sessions of talking treatments, such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy or problem-solving approaches.

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. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.20 to identify a advocacy service in your area).

Your GP

If you want to seek professional help, the first step would usually be to visit your GP. Your GP can discuss your self-harm with you in confidence. They may assess you and let you know about available treatment options, or they may refer you to a specialist.

If your GP is concerned that your self-harm is a threat to your life, or if you need medical treatment for injuries resulting from your self-harm, they may suggest that you spend some time in hospital for treatment and care. For further information on your rights and the law, contact the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland (see 'Useful Contacts' on p.20)

Talking treatments

Talking treatments can be short or long-term and involve talking with someone who is trained to listen with empathy and acceptance – usually a counsellor or therapist. They do not aim to give advice, but offer you the chance to explore your feelings and find your own solutions to any difficulties you are having. Talking things through with another person can help you understand your feelings and behaviour, and start to make positive changes. It can also help you feel supported to have someone else accept and understand your experiences.

Talking treatments are free on the NHS, and some local organisations may provide therapy and counselling free of charge or at low cost. The Scottish Government has set a target that no one should wait longer than eighteen weeks between being referred for a talking treatment and starting treatment. To find out what support you can get in your area, ask your GP or contact SAMH (see 'Useful contacts' on p.20). If you can afford it, you could also consider seeing a private therapist. Check that they are appropriately trained and accredited before you start. (See BABCP and BACP in 'Useful contacts' on p.20).

Talking treatments that might be useful include:

- **Psychodynamic therapy** – This focuses on how past experiences contribute to current experiences and feelings. It can be short or long term. It can be more intensive than some other therapies, because it involves talking about your childhood, your relationships, and how these things might relate to your self-harm.
- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** – CBT aims to identify connections between thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and to help develop practical skills to manage them. A CBT therapist may support you to look at what happens just before you self-harm, to keep a diary of self-harming episodes and find other channels for your feelings. CBT does not usually explore the underlying causes of self-harming.
- **Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)** – This therapy was designed for people with borderline personality disorder (BPD). It combines techniques from CBT that help to change thoughts and feelings, along with techniques that strengthen self-acceptance. If you have been diagnosed with BPD and your self-harm is part of this condition, DBT might be something that would help you. (See SAMH's booklet *Understanding borderline personality disorder* for more information.)

I can't recommend CBT enough. I've found that spotting my triggers and stress indicators is vital. I've learned to deal with the stress and anxiety before it gets bad enough that I self-harm.

I was taught DBT skills. It was the best thing ever to happen to me. I have my bad days but my skills help get me through.

Your relationship with your therapist

One of the most important things about talking treatments is the relationship you have with your therapist. You may not always agree with each other, but you must both be committed to working together in spite of any difficulties.

Sometimes a counsellor may ask you to commit to not self-harming during a course of counselling. It's important that you don't feel pressured into making decisions about this, and that anything you decide is realistic for you at the time. If your counsellor is not specifically trained in self-harm, it might be useful to ask them to find out more, for example by reading information, such as this booklet, or by talking to organisations for people that self-harm. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.20).

Support groups

In a support group, people with similar experiences meet to discuss their feelings and experiences, and share tips for coping. Support groups can be run by a group leader or by group members. They may focus on specific issues, such as self-harm, or be more general. You can find out about support groups in your area by contacting SAMH. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.20)

Online support

If you do not feel ready to talk face-to-face with someone, you might find online support useful. Several self-harm services offer confidential email or text support, and there are also forums where people who self-harm share their experiences and offer support to each other. (See 'Useful contacts' on p.20)

It's important to use caution when using online support, as the content on some sites can be overwhelming and may trigger your urges. Make sure that the websites you use are moderated, and that you know how to protect yourself and other people online. When talking about self-harm online, it's important to think sensitively about how what you write can affect your own, and other people's, feelings. Some people find that talking about feelings, rather than behaviours, is the best way to express yourself safely.



Having this space to be able to talk about my problems, with being anonymous and having that trust that you won't be judged, really got me through some of my darkest moments. Online support became my building bridge into getting offline support.

WHAT CAN FRIENDS AND FAMILY DO TO HELP?

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

Be supportive

There are lots of things that 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.

I do try to talk to her. I just don't want to be a bother. I know she's there for me and I know she does want to help, and she does, when I let her in.

Things that you can do to help include:

- Let your friend or family member know that you are there, if and when they are ready to talk. It is common for people to worry that they will be judged for their self-harm or that they will be a burden on others, so it's important to let them know you are there for them if they want.
- Show concern for their injuries, but at the same time, relate to them as a whole person rather than just someone who self-harms.
- Offer them a chance to talk about how they are feeling. Try to understand and empathise with what they are saying even when it is hard to hear.
- Try to understand that they may be scared of stopping self-harm if they use it as a way of coping. If they are finding it hard to stop, try to help them find other ways of coping and to seek help if they need it (see 'How can I help myself?' on p.7 and 'What treatment and support is available' on p.13).
- Let them be in control of decisions about support and any plans to reduce or stop their self-harm.
- Emphasise other parts of their life where they are doing well, and the good qualities that they have.

Have an honest conversation about staying safe

It is common to feel scared about the possibility of someone you care about 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.

For me it was never about wanting to kill myself. If anything this temporary relief from desperation actually helped me move on from such thoughts.

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 booklet *Suicide - Living with your thoughts*).

Take care of yourself

Finding out that someone you love and care about is self-harming can be a very shocking and upsetting experience. And supporting someone who is self-harming can be a long process with many ups and downs. It's important to take care of yourself – this will help you to be able to stay involved for longer and avoid becoming unwell yourself. (See SAMH's booklet *How to cope as a carer* for more information.)

You might find these suggestions could help:

- Try to have clear boundaries about how much and what sort of support you can offer.
- Find out what other support is available so you are not the only source of support (see 'What treatment and support is available?' on p.13).
- Get support for your own feelings. Lots of organisations offer information and support to people who are concerned about someone else's self-harm, or you may find it helpful to try a talking treatment if you are finding things difficult (see 'Useful contacts' on p.20).

USEFUL CONTACTS

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**Scottish Association
for Mental Health****t: 0141 530 1000****email: enquire@samh.org.uk****w: samh.org.uk**

Details of local SAMH services and information and sign-posting for people concerned about mental health. Office hours 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday.

Breathing Space**t: 0800 83 85 87****w: breathingspace.scot**

Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, anxiety or depression.

Childline Scotland**Childline Freephone: 0800 1111****w: childline.org.uk**

Childline is a free 24-hour helpline for any child or young person with any problems.

Penumbra**t: 0131 475 2380****w: penumbra.org.uk**

Offer specialist services for young people who self harm.

**British Association for
Behavioural and Cognitive
Psychotherapies (BABCP)****t: 0161 705 4304****w: babcp.com**

Information and a register of accredited CBT therapists.

**British Association for
Counselling and Psychotherapy
(BACP)****t: 01455 883 300****Main w: bacp.co.uk****Sister w: itsgoodtotalk.org.uk**

Information on counselling and psychotherapy, and a register for accredited practitioners.

Harmless**w: harmless.org.uk**

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

**NAPAC (The National
Association for People Abused
in Childhood)****helpline: 0808 801 0331****w: napac.org.uk**

Information for people abused in childhood.

**UK Council for Psychotherapy
(UKCP)****t: 020 7014 9955****w: psychotherapy.org.uk**

Maintains register of qualified psychotherapists.

**Mental Welfare Commission
Scotland****Service Users & Carers Advice****Line: 0800 389 6809****w: mwscot.org.uk**

They protect and promote the human rights of people with mental health problems, learning disabilities, dementia and related conditions.

**National Self Harm Network
(NSHN)****w: nshn.co.uk**

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

**National Institute for Health
and Care Excellence (NICE)****t: 0300 323 0140****w: nice.org.uk**

Provides guidance on health and social care.

Samaritans**Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK****Chris, PO Box 90 90****Stirling, FK8 2SA****24-hour helpline: 116 123****email: jo@samaritans.org****w: samaritans.org**

24-hour emotional support for anyone feeling isolated, distressed or struggling to cope.

Sane**helpline: 0300 304 7000****w: sane.org.uk**

Support and information about mental health problems including online support

The Mix**t: 0808 808 4994****w: themix.org.uk**

Support for people aged 16–25.

YoungMinds**parent helpline: 0808 802****5544****w: youngminds.org.uk**

Information for parents and young people about mental health and wellbeing.

Quarriers**t: 01505 612224****w: quarriers.org.uk**

Quarriers provides a diverse range of services offering a practical support and care for children, adults and families.

NHS24**t: 111****w: nhs24.com**

NHS24 is a 24-hour health service

See Me**t: 0141 530 1111****w: seemescotland.org**

National programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination.

Further information

To read or print SAMH's information booklets, visit [samh.org.uk](https://www.samh.org.uk);

to order copies contact SAMH on 0141 530 1000 or at enquire@samh.org.uk



SAMH is Scotland's largest mental health charity and is dedicated to mental health and well-being for all. We are here to provide help, information and support to people affected by mental health problems.

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