

What is self-harm?

Self-harm means any behaviour which involves the deliberate causing of pain or injury to oneself – usually as an extreme way of trying to cope with distressing or painful feelings.

Self-harm includes cutting, burning or hitting oneself, binge-eating or starvation, or repeatedly putting oneself in dangerous situations. It can also involve abuse of drugs or alcohol, including overdosing on prescription medications.

Why do people harm themselves?

Self-harm is often a response to feelings of extreme psychological distress or emotional pain. It may provide short-term relief from these feelings. It may be an attempt to express or even control them briefly. It does not resolve them, however, and can become a compulsive and dangerous activity.

While people who self-harm may not intend to end their lives, the consequences of this risky behaviour can be fatal, and it needs careful assessment and care by a health professional.

How do you get help if you self-harm?

As well as being physically dangerous, self-harm is often a sign that the person needs help for a mental health problem associated with the behaviour. This might be an anxiety disorder, depression or some other condition. It is very important to see a GP or other health professional, therefore, for an assessment and diagnosis, and to discuss a treatment plan. Treating the underlying causes will help make a long-term difference to reducing and stopping the impulse to self-harm.

Treatment is likely to involve seeing a psychologist who is expert in this area, and will know how to help the person best, and to help them to help themselves.

It's a good idea to prepare for seeing a doctor by talking to a trusted person about the self-harming behaviour. This might be a family member or friend, or a suitable person at school or work. It's also helpful to request a longer appointment, so that there is time to talk, and to take along some simple notes – for example, detailing how long the self-harming has been going on, and any other feelings or events which may be associated with it.

Because self-harming behaviour is risky and possibly life-threatening, do not hesitate to call emergency services on 000 if necessary.

Are there alternatives to self-harm?

It can be hard for people who self-harm to stop it by themselves. That's why it's important to talk to someone and to see a doctor. It can help to use alternatives to self-harm which fulfil the same function of relieving distress in the short term.

- ④ *Delay* – for example, put off until you have spoken to someone.
- ④ *Distract* – for example, go for walk, play a game.
- ④ *Divert* – for example, an activity which has a similar effect to self-harm, but without causing injury, such as punching a pillow, drawing on arm instead of cutting, squeezing an icecube.
- ④ *Deep breathing* – or other relaxation method.

These are not solutions to self-harm but can be useful as short-term alternatives while receiving treatment, and should be discussed with the treating doctor or psychologist.

How do I help someone who self-harms?

People who self-harm may be secretive or feel ashamed about their behaviour. It helps to talk calmly and non-judgmentally about your concerns therefore.

- ④ Encourage the person to see a doctor or other health professional about the self-harming.
- ④ Suggest options for getting help, rather than directing the person what to do.
- ④ Do not hesitate to call emergency services on 000 if you think the person is at risk of serious injury.
- ④ Remember that you cannot stop someone from self-harming and it is not your responsibility when they do. You can only do your best to encourage them to get help.

Where to call for help

Immediate assistance

- ④ Emergency services 000
- ④ Local hospital Psychiatric Emergency Team

Telephone counselling

- ④ Lifeline 13 11 14
- ④ Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

Information and advice on mental illness

- ④ 1800 18 SANE (7263)

Visit www.sane.org for Factsheets and other information about mental illness and related issues.