

**What is self-harm?**

Self-harm is a term used when someone injures or harms themselves on purpose. Common examples include over-dosing (self poisoning), hitting, cutting or burning oneself, pulling hair or picking skin, and self strangulation. It can also include taking illegal drugs and excessive amounts of alcohol. Self-harm is always a sign of extreme emotional pain.

**Why do young people harm themselves?**

Self-harm is a way of dealing with very difficult feelings that build up inside.

People say different things about why they do it:

- Some say that they have been feeling desperate about a problem and don't know where to turn for help. They feel trapped and helpless. Self-harm helps them to feel more in control.
- Some people talk of feelings of anger or tension that get bottled up inside, until they feel like exploding. Self-harm helps to relieve the tension that they feel.
- Feelings of guilt or shame may also become unbearable. Self-harm is a way of punishing oneself.
- Some people try to cope with very upsetting or traumatic experiences by convincing themselves that these events never happened. They say that they feel detached from the world and their bodies, and that self-harm is a way of feeling more connected and alive.

**Who is at risk?**

The reasons behind self-harm behaviour are varied and complex. Young people who have difficulties in coping with life events such as relationship problems, unemployment, depression and loss are at greater risk. So are people who take illegal drugs or excessive amounts of alcohol. Women are more likely to self-harm than men.

**Where can I get help?**

Anyone who is harming themselves is struggling to cope and needs help. Self-harm is often kept secret - even from friends and family. The person feels so ashamed, guilty, angry or sad that they can't face talking about it. There may be clues, such as refusing to wear short sleeves or to take off clothing for sports.

If you are a parent or teacher, you may help by:

- Recognising signs of distress, and finding some way of talking with the young person about how they are feeling
- Listening to their worries and problems, and taking them seriously
- Offering support and understanding
- Help with solving problems
- Staying calm and in control of your feelings
- Making sure they know that, with help, it will be possible to stop once the underlying problems have been sorted out
- Seeking help as soon as possible

It's important to make sure that the young person feels that they have someone they can talk to and get support from, when they need it. Otherwise, there is a risk they will harm themselves instead. It's important to ask whether parents and family will be able to give the support that's needed. This may be difficult if there are a lot of problems or arguments at home. As a parent, you may be too upset or angry to be able to give the help that is needed. If so, you should seek advice from your GP.

If you are a teacher, it is important to encourage students to let you know if one of their group is in trouble, upset or shows signs of harming themselves. Friends often worry about betraying a confidence and you may need to explain that self-harm can endanger their lives. For this reason, it should never be kept secret.

**Specialist help**

If you feel that more professional help is needed, the GP should be able to tell you what support is available locally, and make a referral to your child and adolescent or adult mental health services.

The aim is to discover the causes of the problem. It is usual for parents or carers to be involved in treatment. This makes it easier to understand the background to what has happened and to work out what sort of help is needed.

There are different talking approaches, depending on what is causing the problem. Treatment often involves both individual and family work. Individuals will need help with how to cope with the very difficult feelings that lead to self-harm. Families often need help in working out how to give the support that is needed. If depression or anxiety is part of the problem, these will need to be treated.

Occasionally, intensive help may be needed. Sometimes, recovery from very damaging or traumatic experiences happens slowly. Then specialist help is needed over a longer period of time.

**Useful contacts / helpful organisations**

If you or someone you know, is in crisis now and need someone to talk to:

- Contact Samaritans on Free-Call 116123 (a 24 hour listening service for people who are in need of emotional support and are experiencing feelings of distress, despair or suicidal thoughts)
- Contact Childline (a 24 hour support for children and young people in distress) at 1800 66 66 66
- Contact your local doctor or GP out-of-hours service
- Go to, or contact, the Emergency Department of your nearest general hospital
- Contact Pieta House (a free, therapeutic counselling service to people who are in suicidal distress or those who engage in self-harm) at 01 601 0000, [www.pieta.ie](http://www.pieta.ie)
- Contact Bodywhys (offers support, information and understanding for people with eating disorders, their families and friends) at 1890 200 444, or email [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie)
- Visit the following websites:  
[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie)  
[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)  
[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

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**SELF-HARM IN YOUNG PEOPLE**

FOR PARENTS &amp; TEACHERS

**What is self-harm?**

Self-harm are the words used to describe when somebody injures him or herself. This can take a number of forms including:

- Cutting
- Taking overdoses of medicines or tablets
- Punching oneself
- Pulling out hair or eyelashes
- Scratching, tearing or picking at one's skin causing sores and scarring
- Burning
- Inhaling or sniffing harmful substances
- Excessive use and abuse of alcohol and/or drugs

A person could engage in one or more acts of self-harm at any one time, for example, cutting and drinking alcohol. For some young people it is a way of coping with a specific problem. With appropriate support and help, people can learn others ways of coping with their difficulties.

While some people who self-harm may die by suicide, for most people the intention is to live. In fact, self-harm can be seen as the 'opposite' of suicide as it is often a way of coping with life rather than of giving up on it.

**Why do people self-harm?**

Young people who self-harm have often had very difficult or painful experiences or relationships. These may include:

- Bullying or discrimination
- Losing someone close to them such as a parent, brother, sister or friend
- Lack of love and affection or neglect by parents or carers
- Physical or sexual abuse
- A serious illness that affects the way they feel about themselves

Other young people may start to self-harm as a way of dealing with the problems and pressures of everyday life. Pressure can come from family, schools and peer groups to conform or to perform well (for example, getting good exam results). Young people can be made to feel angry, frustrated or bad about themselves if they cannot live up to other people's expectations.

Young people who self-harm may have low self esteem. For some this may be linked to poor body image, eating disorders, or drug misuse. Understanding why young people self-harm involves knowing as much as possible about their lives and lifestyles.

Peer pressures may occasionally be a cause of self-harm. Young people may find themselves among friends or other groups who self-harm and may be encouraged or pressurised to do the same.

**Reasons young people have given for self-harming include:**

- When the level of emotional pressure becomes too high it acts as a safety valve – a way of relieving the tension
- Self-harm may be a way of taking away the bad feelings
- Pain can make someone feel more alive when feeling numb or dead inside
- Punishing oneself relieves feelings of shame or guilt
- When it is too difficult to talk to anyone, it's a form of communication about unhappiness – a way of acknowledging the need for help
- Self-harm gives a sense of control when other parts of life feel out of control

**Understanding why you do it:**

Finding other ways to cope is easier when you begin to recognise the reasons why you self-harm. To do this, you need to understand what leads you to do it. It may be useful to think about:

- What was going on in your life when you first began to harm yourself?
- How do you feel just before you want to harm yourself?
- Would you find it useful to keep a 'mood' diary, writing down your feelings at different times?
- Are you always in the same place or with a particular person?
- Have you any bad memories or thoughts that you can't tell to anyone?

**Think about other things:**

When you feel anxious or upset, doing something you enjoy or trying to think about other things can be a way to help you stop hurting yourself.

You could try:

- Phoning an adult that you trust
- Writing down your feelings in a diary
- Listening to music, drawing or reading
- Going for a walk or a run, dancing, exercising or playing sport
- Counting down slowly from 10 to 0
- Breathing slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth
- Focusing on objects around you and thinking about what they look, sound, smell, taste and feel like

**If you still want to hurt yourself try:**

- Putting your hands into a bowl of ice cubes for a short time or rubbing ice on the part of your body you feel like injuring
- Using a red felt tip marker or lipstick to mark your body instead of cutting
- Putting a rubber band around your wrist and flicking it
- Putting sticking plasters on the parts of your body you want to harm

**It can be hard to stop:**

Sometimes people who self-harm feel ashamed of themselves and therefore hide the behaviour. They may be too ashamed to ask for help. Sometimes, however hard you try on your own, you just can't cope with your feelings. If you can't stop wanting to hurt yourself it is best to get help from someone you can trust. This means finding someone who you can talk to about your problems and who can give you practical help.

**Useful contacts and helpful organisations:**

If you or someone you know, is in crisis now and need someone to talk to:

- Contact Samaritans on Free-Call 116123 (a 24 hour listening service for people who are in need of emotional support and are experiencing feelings of distress, despair or suicidal thoughts)
- Contact Childline (a 24 hour support for children and young people in distress) at 1800 66 66 66
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- Contact Bodywhys (offers support, information and understanding for people with eating disorders, their families and friends) at 1890 200 444, or email [alex@bodywhys.ie](mailto:alex@bodywhys.ie)
- Visit the following websites:  
[www.yourmentalhealth.ie](http://www.yourmentalhealth.ie)  
[www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)  
[www.spunout.ie](http://www.spunout.ie)

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