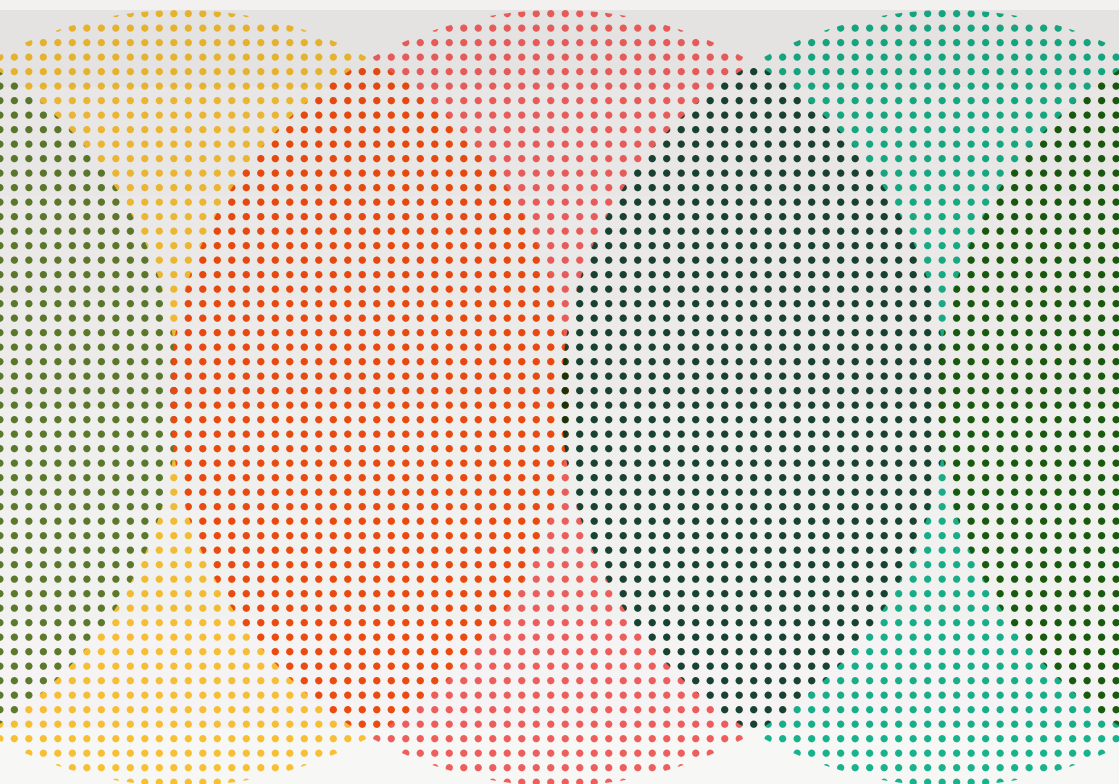


SELF-HARM & YOUNG PEOPLE

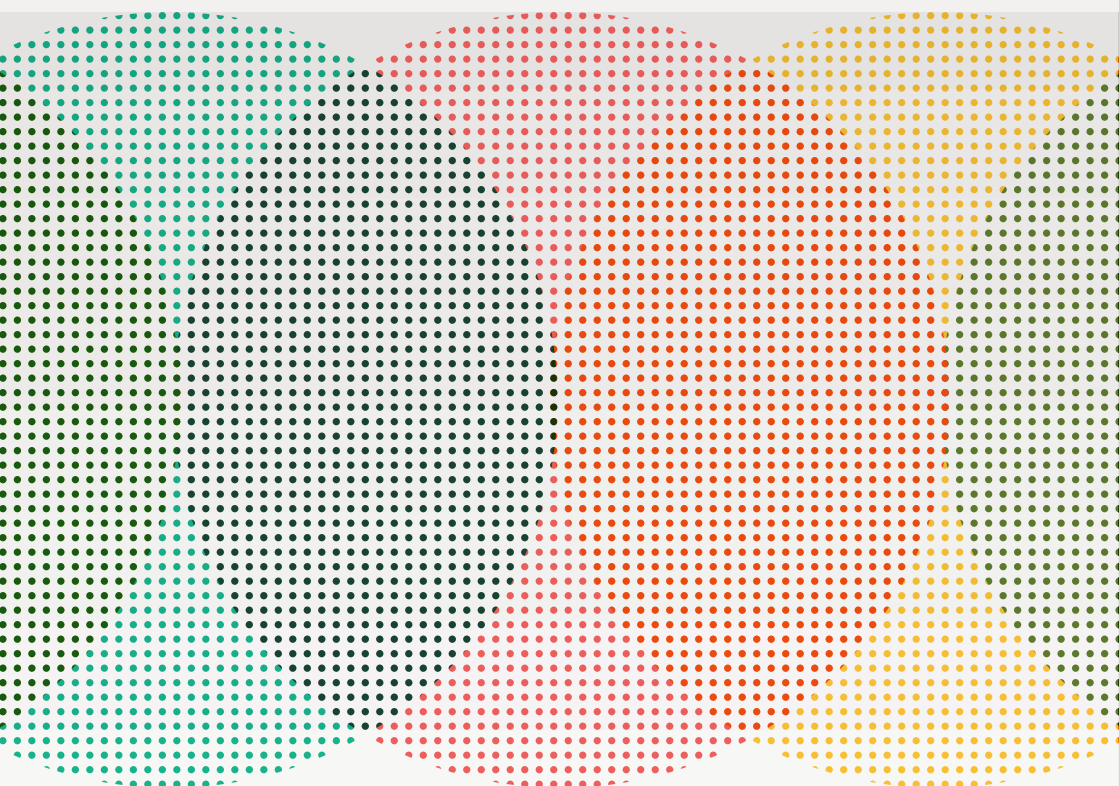
An information booklet for parents & concerned adults



NATIONAL
OFFICE *for*
SUICIDE
PREVENTION



Connecting for Life



SELF-HARM

This booklet explores the topic of self-harm and provides an overview of what you as a parent or concerned adult can do to support a young person who may be self-harming or having thoughts of suicide.

CONTENTS

04 What is self-harm?

05 Why would someone harm themselves?

06 What can I do to help?

09 What is unhelpful?

10 Useful resources

WHAT IS SELF-HARM?¹

Self-harm is when someone inflicts physical harm on themselves, often without anyone else knowing. Self-harm is a behaviour that is often the expression of the person's emotional distress.

Some examples are cutting, burning, biting or hitting, pulling out hair or scratching and picking at sores on skin. Self-harm also includes forms of behaviour with some level of suicide intent such as overdoses.

Self-harm is not necessarily a suicide attempt and engaging in self-harm may not mean that someone wants to die.

Most commonly, self-harm is a way of coping with difficult or painful feelings.

However, people who self-harm are statistically at a greater risk of going on to take their own lives. If the emotional problems associated with self-harm escalate, and are not dealt with, the behaviour is likely to continue and become increasingly concerning.

[1 Adapted from HSE 2007, Understanding Self-Harm](#)

WHY WOULD SOMEONE HARM THEMSELVES?

Self-harm may be used as a way to cope with stressful, upsetting or difficult experiences and the strong feelings associated with them.

SELF-HARM MAY:

- Provide a way to express difficult or hidden feelings. Overwhelming feelings can sometimes leave young people feeling numb or empty. Engaging in self-harm may provide a temporary sense of feeling again or be a way to express anger, sadness, grief or hurt.
- Be a way of punishing themselves.
- Be a way of communicating a need for support when they feel unable to use words or any other way to do so.
- Be a way of proving to themselves that they are not invisible.
- Be a way of making themselves feel alive.
- Provide a feeling of control. They might feel that self-harm is one way they can have a sense of control over their life, feelings, or body, especially if they feel as if other things in their life are out of control.
- Provide the person with a means to comfort themselves.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

If you learn that a young person is self-harming:

- Don't panic.
- Deal with any immediate medical concerns.
- Listen and find out what they need.
- Acknowledge their pain without being intrusive.
- Try to understand the severity of their distress; self-harm is often an expression of intense inner turmoil.
- Provide a safe and open environment in which they can freely discuss their thoughts and feelings.
- Talk about the self-harm; pretending it doesn't exist will not make it go away and not talking about it often reinforces the shame and secrecy associated with it.
- If they don't want to talk straight away, let them know you are there to talk whenever they want.
- Let them know how you feel; many young people who self-harm have trouble expressing their thoughts and feelings, so don't withhold yours.
- See the person, not the injuries; the wider context is always important when someone is self-harming.
- Encourage them to cry - crying is a healthy and normal way to express sadness or frustrations.
- Tell them that when they get urges to self-harm to try to put off harming themselves. They can try to distract themselves until they feel the anxiety and the urge to self-harm have passed, by:

- * *Talking to someone; either face-to-face, by calling a helpline or going online.*
 - * *Doing exercise.*
 - * *Playing a game – a board game or online.*
 - * *Shouting or singing at the top of their lungs, on their own or to music - they can do this into a pillow if they don't want other people to hear.*
 - * *See information on self-harm on ie.reachout.com.*
- Suggest keeping a journal as it can help to relieve stress and tension by writing about feelings they might not be able to talk about.
 - Offer to help with relaxation activities such as yoga, meditation and breathing exercises, which are often helpful in reducing anxiety.
 - Talk to a professional, such as a GP, to get further information and advice about self-harm.
 - Encourage them to see a mental health professional to get support. They will need to understand why they self-harm and learn new ways to cope, if they are to stop the behaviour. Talking therapy is likely to be an essential part of the help that is needed. Talk to the young person about what kind of support they would consider, and help by bringing them to appointments. You may also be asked to take part in the therapy process.
 - Be realistic. Don't expect the behaviour to stop immediately. It may take a long time to replace the self-harm with a healthier coping strategy. Talking with you may be the first step.
 - Devise an emergency care plan together, in case the person injures themselves more severely than intended.
 - Don't forget to look after yourself and your own mental health, by getting support from trusted family and friends. It can be emotionally draining to support someone who self-harms. By helping yourself you are also improving things for them too.

*See the person,
not the injuries;
the wider context
is always important
when someone is
self-harming.*

WHAT IS UNHELPFUL?

Telling someone not to self-harm is both ineffective and condescending.

- Most young people who self-harm would stop if they could (it can be a coping mechanism they use to stay alive) and even casual comments encouraging your son, daughter or the young person you're concerned about to stop should be avoided. Such comments risk damaging your relationship and forming a barrier to effective communication.
- You shouldn't make assumptions that your son, daughter or the young person you're concerned about wants to talk about the self-harm, that they are doing it to seek attention or that they actually want to die.
- Don't make them feel responsible or guilty.
- It is unhelpful to punish them.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Statutory services and health professionals

General Practitioner (GP)

A GP is a doctor trained to deal with general physical and mental health issues that a person of any age might have.

VISIT:

www.icgp.ie to find a list of GPs working in Ireland.

Health Service Executive (HSE) Primary Care Psychology Services

HSE Community Psychology Services provide a wide range of assessment and therapeutic services for children and adolescents up to 18-years-old, and their families. They can be contacted through your local HSE Health Office and referrals are accepted from parents, teachers, GPs and other health service providers.

VISIT:

www.hse.ie for local health office contact details.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

CAMHS is a free specialist service operated by the HSE for children and adolescents with serious emotional, behavioural or mental health problems. The service caters for young people up to 18-years-old. A young person must be referred to CAMHS by a health professional who is familiar with the case. This will usually be the family GP.

Counsellors

Counselling is the process of discussing issues and feelings with a professional to work through emotional distress.

For a list of accredited counsellors and psychotherapists working in Ireland ask your GP for a recommendation.

Tusla

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. A range of supports for young people and families is offered through Tusla's Family and Community services.

VISIT:

www.tusla.ie

In an emergency:

Emergency services can be contacted at any time of the day or night by calling [999](tel:999) or [112](tel:112). You can also go straight to the Accident and Emergency department of your nearest general hospital if you need immediate medical assistance.

Support websites

Aware

Aware works to create a society where people who experience depression and related mood disorders, and their families, are understood and supported.

www.aware.ie

BeLonGTo.org

BeLonG To is the national organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) young people, aged between 14 and 23, providing safe and fun services through dedicated youth groups across Ireland.

www.belongto.org

Bodywhys

Bodywhys is a national voluntary organisation supporting people affected by eating disorders.

www.bodywhys.ie

Childline

This is part of the Irish Society for the prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC). Childline try to empower, support and protect young people.

Tel: 1800-666-666 24 hours a day

Text: 'Talk' to 50101

(10.00am – 4.00am) every day.

www.childline.ie

Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a network of projects across Ireland working with communities to better support young peoples mental health and well being.

www.jigsaw.ie

ReachOut Parents

ReachOut Parents provides reliable information about supporting the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

www.reachoutparents.com

Parentline

This service supports and gives guidance and information on all aspects of being a parent.

www.parentline.ie

Pieta House

Pieta provides a specialised treatment programme for people who have suicidal ideation or who participate in self-harming behaviours.

www.pieta.ie

24-hour helpline: 1800 247 247

ReachOut.com

ReachOut.com is Ireland's online youth mental health service and is dedicated to taking the mystery out of mental health by providing quality assured mental health information.

ie.reachout.com

Samaritans

Samaritans provide befriending 24 hours a day to those who are dealing with personal crisis, whatever you've done, whatever life's done to you, no pressure, no judgement, they are there for you any time.

www.samaritans.ie

24-hour helpline: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.ie

SpunOut

SpunOut is a youth led national charity working to empower young people between the ages of 16-25 to create personal and social change.

www.spunout.ie

YourMentalHealth.ie

A website developed by the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention which highlights some of the things we can do to look after our mental health.

www.yourmentalhealth.ie

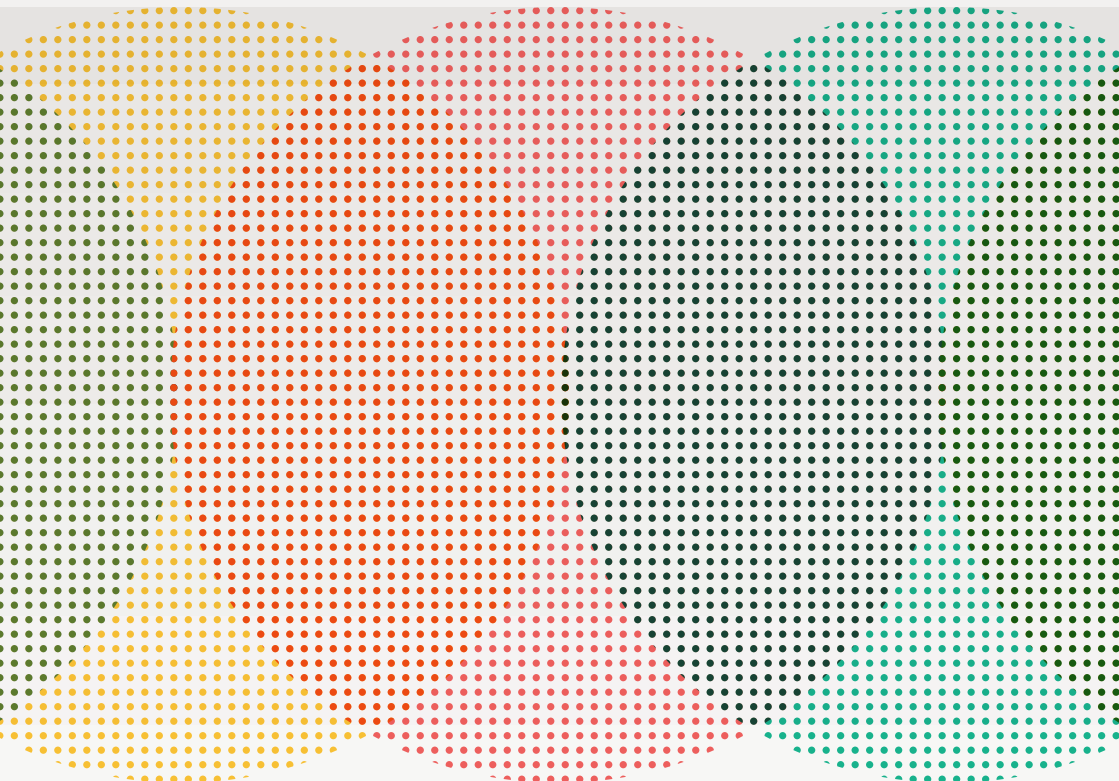
*Telling someone
not to self-harm
is both ineffective
and condescending.*

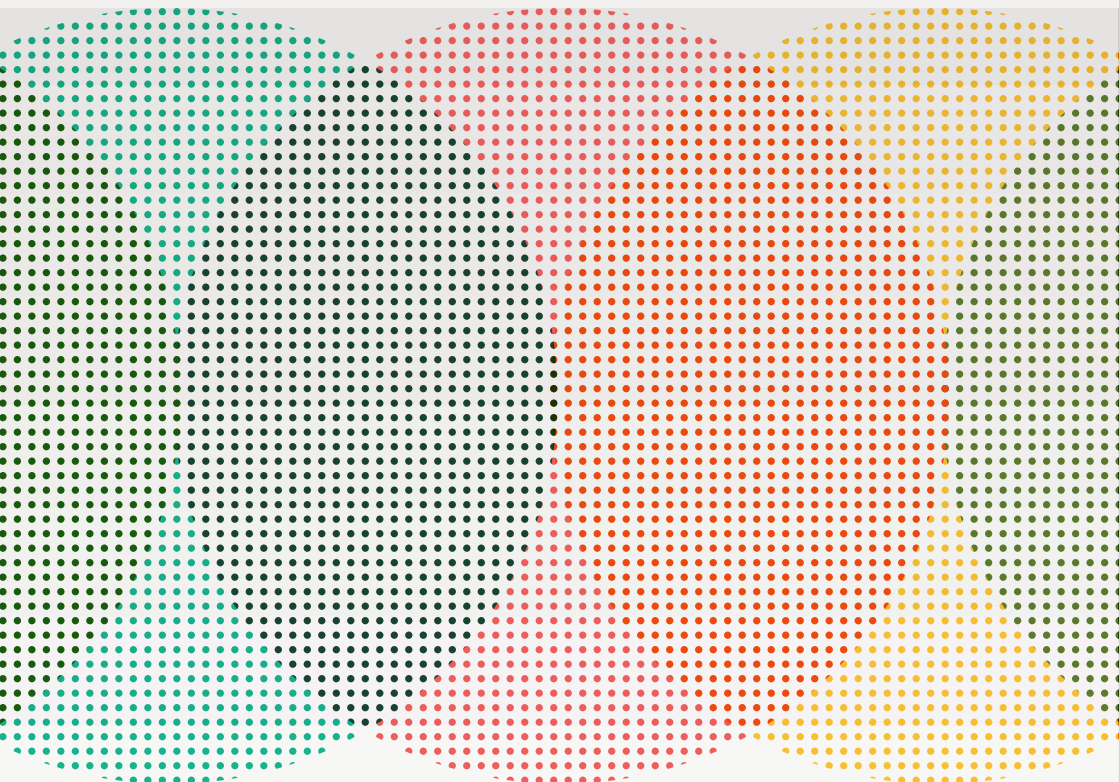
Resource information

This handbook is designed to provide basic knowledge and awareness of self-harm in children and young people, with advice about ways to respond.

This information booklet for parents and concerned adults was produced by ReachOut.com and funded by the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention.

Updated May 2019.





National Office for Suicide Prevention

HSE Community Strategy and Planning

Stewart's Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin 20. T: 01 620 1670

www.nosp.ie