



# Helping to Cope with Self Harm

A Self Help Guide for  
Students and Parents

## Self Harm

Many people may self harm in some form or another. It is often used as a coping mechanism or a way of connecting or disconnecting with the outside world. Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences. 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 yourself for your feelings and experiences
- create a reason to physically care for themselves

After self-harming you may feel a short-term sense of release, but 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. 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.

## How Can You Help Yourself

During intense urges to hurt yourself, it can be hard to imagine that it's possible to do anything else. But there are steps you can take to help you make other choices over time. Talk to someone you trust. Don't try to manage things alone. It is important that any wounds are treated.

## 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?

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.

## 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. 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	Possible distractions
<b>anger and frustration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exercise</li> <li>• hit cushions</li> <li>• shout and dance</li> <li>• tear something up into hundreds of pieces</li> </ul> <p>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.</p>
<b>need to control</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• write lists</li> <li>• tidy up</li> <li>• have a throw-out</li> <li>• write a letter saying everything you are feeling, then tear it up</li> <li>• weed a garden</li> <li>• clench then relax all your muscles</li> </ul>

### **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'

## **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.

## **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.

## **Useful Resources and Information**

[www.harmless.org.uk](http://www.harmless.org.uk)

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

[www.healthyyoungmindsinherts](http://www.healthyyoungmindsinherts)

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)