

national
self harm
awareness day
2024

SELF - HARM

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



What is self-harm?

Self-Harm is a general term that describes any way in which someone deliberately hurts or harms themselves, often as a coping strategy, in response to difficult feelings, emotions, memories or experiences.

Some of these might be occurring in the present, or some might be events which happened some time ago, or both.

Any behaviour which causes harm or injury to someone in response to their own difficult emotions can be described as self-harm. Often, self-harm is seen as an immediate, physical act including activities like cutting, burning, punching or scratching oneself. It can however also describe other harmful, risky behaviours such as having unsafe sex, purposefully misusing medication, drugs or alcohol, hair pulling or over/under eating. It can take many physical forms and may begin lightly with scratching or skin picking and then progress to using implements such as blades, broken glass, razors or knives.

How many people self-harm?

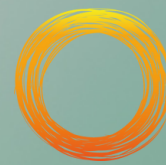
The short answer: we don't know. Due to the hidden nature of self-harm, many young people don't tell anyone, or perhaps only tell their peers. Much of the research around levels of self-harm only uses the number of people who seek medical attention (e.g. through an Accident and Emergency unit) as a result of their self-harm injuries). However, it is widely agreed that A&E statistics are just the tip of the iceberg with the wider community data never being known. Although we are aware more young people are reaching out for support from professionals around self-harm, we also cannot be sure that this means more people are self-harming, rather than that more people are talking about it.

A 2021 Cambridge University report states that "between one in five and one in seven adolescents in England self-harms" ¹, which gives an indication of just how big an issue it is becoming.



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Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm is a way of managing feelings and emotions. It is a symptom of a bigger story. This means that focusing only on the self-harm itself without addressing where it's coming from will miss the point.

There is no single reason why people self-harm. Part of the story involves things someone is going through in life which are painful and difficult. Another part of the story concerns how able someone feels to manage those experiences and feelings. For all of us, how we manage difficult experiences grows out of how we have been taught to deal with them as we have grown up (both what we've been explicitly taught, but also what we have learnt through observation), our different personalities and how much support we have. Throw into the mix the particular challenges of how our bodies and brains are changing as teenagers and things can feel hard.

When all this comes together then, self-harm is a method of coping. It's an extreme form of self-regulation – a way of getting back to feeling 'normal' again. Some people use it to escape emotions that feel unbearable, or to release or change them. Self-harm makes people feel different afterwards and that's why they do it. Perhaps we can all relate to that; when we are overcome with challenging and uncomfortable feelings, we all want to feel different.

In our experience, there are some situations or struggles that particularly seem to lead young people to self-harm in order to cope. This is not a comprehensive list of things that cause people to self-harm, but an overview of some of experiences that may lie under the surface.

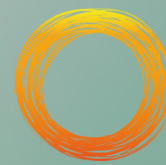
Can you recover from Self-Harm?

Yes - there are lots of treatments that can help with self-harm - from dealing with the things triggering underlying emotions, through to helping break the pattern of harming and finding other ways to cope in rough moments (continued on next page)...



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Can you recover from Self-Harm (continued...)

Most people benefit greatly from the opportunity to talk about how they're feeling, and why self-harm seems to help, before exploring alternative ways of coping. Understanding what is going on makes a real difference too.

Treatment is therefore usually focused on talking therapies like counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy, although some people may find medication helps by treating underlying depression or anxiety.

Very few people find they just stop self-harming, just like that. Treatment helps you gradually get better - so you self-harm less often, or less severely. Things improve bit by bit. Don't despair if a young person has managed not to harm for a bit but then it happens again. Recovery takes time.

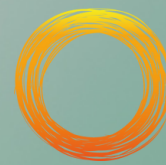
The importance of giving young people space to talk

It is common for self-harm to be a secretive and personal act regardless of the method. Discovering that someone has been self-harming can bring up a lot of questions and emotions around how to support them. This is especially the case when you feel protective over the young person and want to 'swoop in' and fix them. For example, as parents it can feel particularly like it is our job to 'fix' the situation, but when it comes to self-harm this idea can be really complicated and challenging.

Many young people prefer to speak to someone outside their home about self-harm because they do not need to worry so much about the impact of what they say
(continued on next page)...



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The importance of giving young people space to talk (continued)...

Young people can often feel that talking to their parents is incredibly difficult – perhaps feeling responsible for how they'll make their parents react. If a young person chooses to talk to someone other than parents or carers, don't stop them. Instead, encourage this and ensure that they feel safe and able to have these conversations. This can be hard to tolerate, but it isn't personal; often it is done as a form of protection from potentially upsetting a parent or family member.

Whether a young person has talked with you about their self-harm, or are speaking to someone else about it, asking for help and seeking support yourself are important parts of responding to their self-harm. Support can come in different forms, but research shows that young people seeking social support from both professionals and peers has the greatest impact for help. Although many young people would also choose to talk face-to-face with a professional, a study completed by Cliffe et al (2021) shows the importance of online support for young people as well. Using an online platform like Alumina (see below), whether for group support or as a way of communicating about self-harm provides a young person with a space to speak in a less exposed manner.

You can find out more about self-harm and ways to offer support to young people by taking a look at our new book 'understanding Self-harm'- available from the Youthscape store youthscape.co.uk/store

For self-harm support for young people 10-17, visit the Alumina website selfharm.co.uk



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