



A parent and  
carers guide to  
**Coping with  
self-harm**

Carlisle Eden



This guide was developed with the aim of supporting parents, carers and other family members that are worried about a young person that may be self-harming. It includes information on self-harm, the causes and how to support a young person when facing this problem and what support is available.

## **What is self-harm?**

Self-harm is a behaviour that is done deliberately. Although some people who self-harm may be suicidal, self-harm is often used as a way to manage difficult emotions but this behaviour can often result in accidental death. At least 10% of adolescents report having self-harmed.

Self-harm can include:

- Self-cutting
- Taking an overdose
- Hitting or bruising
- Intentionally taking too much or even too little medication
- Burning
- Hanging
- Suffocation

## Reasons for self-harm

There are no fixed reasons for why people self-harm, For some, self-harm is linked to specific experiences and acts as a way of dealing with something that's either happening at the moment or which happened in the past. For others, the reasons are less clear and can be harder to make sense of.

Self-harm can have different functions, some of them may be:

- To reduce tension
- To manage extreme emotional upset
- To provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- To form an escape
- To express emotions such as anger, hurt and frustration
- To try to create an effort to regain control over feelings and problems
- To provoke care from others
- As an attempt to punish themselves or others
- Bullying abuse may be a trigger for self-harm
- Self-harm can also be a suicide attempt

## What makes a young person vulnerable to self-harm?

**Individual factors:** difficult feelings such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. Bullying, poor problem solving, high impulsivity, eating disorders, drug and alcohol abuse

**Family Factors:** Poor parental relationships, drug use within the family, unreasonable expectations, conflict, excessive punishments, family history of abuse, neglect and self-harm

**Social factors:** Media and internet influences, difficulties in relationships, bullying, rejection, abuse, friends who self-harm

## Discovering about self-harm

Finding out that your child self-harms is very upsetting and stressful. It is normal to experience a strong range of emotions but it is important to try to understand and accept them so that you don't risk misdirecting them towards the child. If you try to think of their self-harm behaviour as an expression of deep emotions that they can't handle. If you react by getting angry and the child witnesses this then you are only going to make the situation worse. That's why it's very important to support your child as best as you can. Here are some things to think about:

- Don't bring up self-harm straight away but have a conversation
- Try organising an activity, like a walk or drive
- Do your best to let them know you are not judging them and that you love them and that will not change
- Ask if there is anything worrying them and how they are feeling
- Show that you are prepared to listen to what they have to say
- If you find that they don't want to engage in conversation ask if they'd prefer to write down their feelings on a note, email or text
- If the child is open about their self-harm, try to help them work out what is triggering it
- Help them to see solutions to their problems and encourage them to think about long term effects and how things may change in the future
- Do not let self-harm become the main focus of your relationship with your child
- Remind them of their strengths and abilities
- Let them know that you want to help but explain that you may not know the best thing to do so offer to try to find a solution together, for example visiting a GP

Talking to the young person you are caring for can be challenging. But they will remember what you say even if they don't seem to be listening at the time and may take your advice or talk to you about it at a later time.

## Alternatives to self-harm

Self-harm is helping your child to cope with their difficult feelings, this is why it's very important to think of other ways that they can manage and express their feelings. This can include stress management techniques, distractions and thinking of alternative ways to unload extreme emotions. Sometimes joining social groups and sports clubs can provide a helpful distraction and provide social support. Creating art and journaling can also be a healthy distraction. There are many evening courses and classes available that your child can enrol in and this allows them to express themselves through art amongst peers.

[Alumina](#) is a free online 7 week course for young people struggling with self-harm. Each course has up to 14 young people, all accessing the sessions from their own phones, tablets or laptops across the UK.

## Alternative suggestions

### **Stress relief distractions:**

- Walking
- Colouring books
- Keeping a diary or a web blog
- Caring for a pet
- Watching a new TV show or movie
- Listening to calming music
- Having an Epsom salt bath which promotes relaxation

### **Releasing Emotions:**

- Snapping an elastic band against your wrist.
- Sports and physical exercise
- Using a punch bag or working or hold boxing mitts for the child. This helps release pent up frustration and also provides you both with an activity which is also good for your wellbeing
- Listening to loud music and singing or shouting

## **Managing injuries caused by self-harm,**

If you are concerned about a wound or injury, for example if the young person has cut themselves and the wound is too deep to manage at home then you should seek emergency medical help immediately.

**If you know that your child self-harms then it's important to always have a first aid kit in the house.**

### **Cuts and wounds**

- Apply pressure to bleeding cuts using a bandage or towel, a kitchen towel may be less likely to stick onto the wound.
- Clean the wound under running tap water and apply a sterile adhesive dressing
- You will know if the wound has become infected if there is a bad smell, swelling, pus forming or redness spreading. It's important to seek medical help immediately

### **Burns**

- Don't use ice or any creams or greasy substances such as butter
- Cool with cold water for 10 to 30 minutes, then cover with cling film

### **Overdoses**

- Get your child to the emergency services immediately
- Try to find out what they have taken and inform the emergency medical staff
- If your child won't tell you, then look around for empty pill bottles or blister packs

### **Scars**

- If your child has scars they are embarrassed about, you can look into commercial products that help the scarring fade over time
- Make up can work as a scar concealer
- Remind your child that most scars eventually fade

## Attending to your own needs as a parent or carer

It is normal to experience strong emotions when you find out a child in your care is self-harming but it is important that you are looking after yourself as well as your child. The recovery for self-harm can be long so during this time be aware of your own signs of stress and fatigue. Pay attention to your sleep hygiene and physical signs of stress such as stomach cramps and anxiety and depression.

It's important to look after your own wellbeing. When you are upset or find the stress and worry starting to overwhelm you, try to do things you enjoy such as going out with friends, exercise, hobbies etc.

Learn to identify and accept these feelings and if you feel them creeping up it is beneficial to find an outlet for these emotions. Talking to a friend about how you are feeling can help reduce this stress and there are also lots of services and helplines available to you. You may find yourself feeling other strong emotions such as guilt and anger but be careful that your child does not see this as they may think it is directed at them.

Prioritise your schedule and give yourself permission to not worry about less important tasks. Take some time off work if you are able and accept help and support from friends and family.

Remember, your own self-care will give you the emotional strength to help support your child during this difficult time and it will also show positive role modelling through the importance of self-care.

At Carlisle Eden Mind, we provide **Youth Mental Health First Aid** training courses throughout the year. This training teaches you how to identify, understand and recognise mental ill health in children and young people and will give you the confidence to respond appropriately to support a family member that may be struggling with their mental health.

## When to seek to help

If you are concerned about your child, particularly if the self-harm or distress increases or you notice problems such as depression or anxiety you should seek further support.

- This is best done through your GP who may refer your child to a community Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) where an assessment will be done and a plan of support for treatment
- If your child goes to hospital for any reason related to self-harm, they should be seen by someone who will talk to them about self-harm and assess their mental well-being. If the situation isn't clear to you, ask the nurses and doctors for more information
- If your child is reluctant to getting help or doesn't acknowledge the risks you can still seek support from your GP

Trying to help your child may sometimes be frustrating. However, try to remember that when they push you away is often when they need you most, so be as patient as possible with them and promote communication as much as you can without pressuring them to speak.

## What can we do for you?

Our **MindLine Cumbria** service is here to provide practical information, guidance and reassurance to help you more effectively support a loved one. We help you to understand their situation and any mental health problem and what support may be available to them.

We have beaded plastic bands available to pick up at our office if you'd like to call ahead and we can make sure to have them ready for you to pick up.

You can access **MindLine Cumbria** through the following four ways:

**Call MindLine Cumbria on: 0300 561 0000**

**Web-chat: [www.mindlinecumbria.org](http://www.mindlinecumbria.org)**

**Email: [info@mindlinecumbria.org](mailto:info@mindlinecumbria.org)**

**Text: Text the word 'Mind' to 81066**

Available from:

12pm – 11pm Monday to Friday

5pm – 11pm Saturday to Sunday

## Sources for support for parents and carers

### Professional help:

GPs | School Nurses | Counsellors and Therapists

### Helplines and Online Information/Support

[MindLine Cumbria](#) | Call: **0300 561 0000**

[YoungMinds](#) | Call: **0808 802 5544**

[Samaritans](#) | Call: **116 123**

[Harmless](#)

## Sources for support for young people

### Professional help:

GPs

School Counsellors

School Nurses

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

### Helplines and Online Information/Support

[YoungMinds](#) | Call: **0808 802 5544**

[Childline](#) | Call: **0800 1111**

[Samaritans](#) | Call: **116 123**

[Harmless](#)

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### Acknowledgements

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