

A photograph of two young women standing outdoors, leaning on a metal railing. The woman on the left has long brown hair and is wearing a light blue denim jacket. The woman on the right has blonde hair and is wearing a black long-sleeved top and leopard print pants. They appear to be in conversation. The background is a blurred green foliage.

A guide
for parents
and carers

Self-harm support pack

Written & produced by

Every life matters ...

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Introduction

Supporting someone who is self-harming can feel a huge responsibility.

You may have lots of questions, big emotions and worry. Take a deep breath, and be reassured that your young person is looking for help. There is help available for them, and for you, too.

This pack is full of information, and contains things that they can use when they feel the urge to self-harm, or after they have self-harmed. We have provided envelopes for them to sort them into. Hopefully they will have read the booklet called 'Read First' to explain more.

This pack is just the start on their road to recovery.



We have created digital versions of some of the re-usable resources so that they can print more when they need them. **Scan this QR code:**



What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone hurt themselves on purpose. Examples include cutting, burning, poisoning, head-banging, hair-pulling, skin picking, biting, pinching or bruising. Other forms might be more indirect such as self-neglect, excessive risk taking, sexual promiscuity, self-trolling, alcohol and substance misuse.

Self-harming behaviour is relatively common – at least 10% of adolescents report having self-harmed - and it can affect anyone of any age, background or race. But it's something that needs to be taken seriously.

Self-harm is not a positive way to deal with difficult feelings and experiences, and over time it can be hard to stop. That's why it's so important to spot it as soon as possible and do everything you can to help.



You'll need to be braver than you've ever been in your life.
Breathe.

Thank them for coming to tell you. Tell them they've done an amazingly brave thing to trust you. Tell them it's going to be something you can, and always will be able to help them with.

Louise

Understanding the cycle of self-harm

For many people, self-harm is a way to get short-term relief from overwhelming feelings. Helping someone to break this cycle and find other ways to cope is important.

This can include distraction, stress-management techniques, or safe ways to release strong emotions. Some people find that delaying self-harm reduces the urge or makes it pass. Making it harder to access objects used for self-harm can also help create this pause.

The urge to self-harm is often strongest for 15-30 minutes. Finding something to do during this time can make a real difference.



There are apps that can help people manage these urges, including Calm Harm and DistrACT.



Many people stop self-harming when the time is right for them.

It's a way of coping right now, and doing it now does NOT mean that they will have to do it forever.

Why do people self-harm?

There is no single reason why people self-harm and it can affect anyone of any age. It can be a way of:

- Relieving overwhelming thoughts
- Reducing tension and stress
- Expressing emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- Regaining control over feelings or problems
- To feel real, or experience a strong physical sensation

Not everyone self-harms because of difficult situations, or because they feel distressed. Some autistic people might self-harm for other reasons, such as:

- Sensory overload (too much noise, light, touch, crowds, etc)
- Sudden, unexpected change in routine
- Communication breakdown (they can't communicate what they need in the moment)
- Masking (or camouflaging) how you feel around others
- Burnout from navigating a neurotypical world
- Physical discomfort (too hot, hungry, or in pain, etc) that isn't identified or can't be expressed



If you are worried that someone you care for may be self-harming - start the conversation.

Be honest and open with them and explain why you are concerned – re-assure them that you are there to listen, that you love them, and that will not change. If they are unwilling to talk to you now, give them space and re-assure them that there are people who are there to talk to and who will listen.



Some autistic people don't pick up on body signals, such as hunger, feeling hot, or needing the loo. Listening to body signals is called interoception, and someone who has low **interoception** may not be able to spot the signals that relate to emotions.


They might not connect that when they feel sick or have a heaviness in the chest, it's because they are feeling anxious. When interoception is low, crisis can build without warning. **This means that they might self-harm as a way of dealing with the overwhelming feelings.**

Other people find it difficult to work out what emotion they are experiencing, and express it. This is called **alexithymia**. Half of all autistic people and 10% of neurotypical people have alexithymia. Having alexithymia could increase the risk of self-harming, as **it can be hard to identify and describe the emotions you are experiencing before it gets to crisis point.**

Your young person might find it helpful to use a scale to identify how they are feeling.

We have a few different scales here:





When you discover your child is self-harming try not to react in a negative way to your child (even though you feel sick to the stomach inside) you don't want them to feel bad, in the wrong or judged. React in a calm, loving way that they feel they can trust you and come to you if need be.

Helen

Deep breath, don't panic!

Finding out that someone you care for is self-harming can leave you feeling a range of strong emotions such as confusion, anger, shock, guilt, worry and so on.

It's challenging, but try not to over-react.

The main reason that people find it hard to talk about their self-harming is fear of others' reaction and being misunderstood.

Try to hold on to the idea that their self-harm behaviour is an expression of strong feelings and experiences that right now they can't handle any other way.

Acknowledge to them that opening up about their self-harming behaviour was a very brave thing to do and that you are grateful that they have told you.

Re-assure them there is help and support out there. They are not alone, and neither are you.

How do I know someone is self-harming?

Worried someone you care for might be self-harming?
Keep an eye open for these signs:

- Unexplained cuts, burns, bite-marks, bruises or bald patches
- Bloody tissues, bandages or wipes in waste bins
- Concealed lighters or sharps
- Becoming withdrawn or isolated
- Low mood, lack of interest in life or depression
- Blaming themselves for problems
- Feeling like a failure, useless, or hopeless
- Keeping their body covered

Have plenty of medical items to care for the wounds, keep it well stocked.

Check that the wounds are healing and — if they are cutting in the same place — the severity for depth and infection in case medical attention required.

Zoe



Supporting someone who is self-harming



Friends and family can play a huge role in supporting someone who self-harms. You can help by:


- **Offer a listening ear** and show you care when someone is struggling.
- **Avoid judgements**; we know that terms like 'attention seeking' stop people from seeking help.
- Remind the person of their **strengths and abilities**.
- **Look online or at recommended apps together** at coping strategies and ways they can manage self-harm urges. Remember, what works for some may not work for others. Encourage them to try different strategies until they find one that works.
- **Encourage them to keep a diary**, to look for patterns, triggers and urges. (There's more about this in the guide for young people.)
- **Explore what support and services are available** and offer to go with them to appointments.
- **Agree with them** about access to self-harm methods.
- **Make sure first aid materials are available** and encourage them to get medical attention when needed.
- **Watch for signs of bullying, abuse or other difficult situations** that may be triggering self-harm.
- **Don't treat them any differently** from normal in other areas of their life.
- **Appreciate that they might not be able to stop immediately**, it will take time.
- **Be mindful of unhelpful social media use.**

Remember, you don't need to understand why they self-harm, and you don't need to fix things. Listening and showing you care can be really powerful in itself, alongside working together to find the coping strategies and the support they need.

Thoughts of suicide

The majority of people use self-harm as a way of dealing with difficulties in their life, not as a way of wanting to end their own life – but having a history of self-harm is one of the highest risk factors for suicide.

Over 50% of people who die by suicide have a history of self-harm. If you are at all worried that someone you care for is having thoughts of suicide, ask them, and ask them directly. You will not put ideas in their head, research shows this. It also shows that talking directly about suicide significantly reduces the risks of it happening.



We found nights to be the worst time, so we went on long drives in the early hours... we hugged and cried... but most of all we listened without judging...

Catherine

For more information on how to help if someone is having thoughts of suicide, scan here:



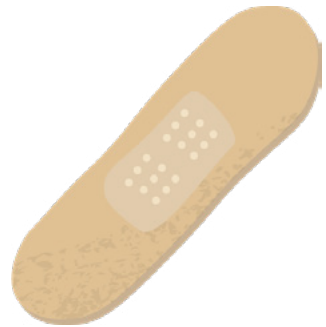
First Aid

First aid for bleeding wounds

1. Apply gentle pressure with a clean cloth or gauze until the bleeding stops.
2. If the person feels faint, lay them down with their legs raised whilst you treat the wound.
3. Clean the wound with clean running water, gently washing it with soap. Dry it with a clean tea towel or face cloth.
4. Cover the wound once cleaned and dried with a sterile bandage to keep it clean and protected.
5. Watch for signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, warmth, or pus. It's important to keep the wound clean, so change the dressing if it gets wet, or dirty.

When to visit A&E:

- If the wound is deep, or continues to bleed through the dressing;
- If the wound becomes infected.
- If the bleeding wound is on the scalp, cover with a bandage, and go to minor injuries or A&E for treatment.



For more information on first aid, and information on other injuries such as a head injury, download the British Red Cross First Aid App.

First aid for burns

1. Hold the burn under cool running water for 20 minutes to reduce pain and swelling.
2. Once the burn is cooled, cover it with a dressing to protect it from infection.
3. If blisters form, don't burst the blisters; cover them with a dressing to protect the fragile skin.

When to visit A&E:

- If the burn is blistered and larger than the palm of the hand;
 - If the burn is deep, and looks waxy and white, or charred;
 - If the burn affects a sensitive area of the body, such as the face, hands, feet, or genitals.
4. If there is signs of infection, such as redness, swelling, warmth, or pus.



Call 999 if:

- The wound is deep and/or large and bleeding heavily;
- The person loses consciousness or shows signs of shock, such as paleness, rapid breathing, or a weak pulse;
- The person is having difficulty breathing or experiencing chest pain;
- The person has ingested harmful substances or has taken an overdose;
- The person has a temperature, feels unwell, is drowsy or confused and has an infected wound;
- The person has tried to take their own life.
- The person has banged their head and has lost consciousness, vomits, or sees double.

Looking after yourself

If you are supporting someone who self-harms, you can experience strong emotions and it is important that you look after yourself as well. Recovery from self-harm may be a long process.

- Try to find time for relaxation and “me time” and keep on doing the things you enjoy.
- Look after your sleep patterns, eat well and try to exercise.
- Be aware of your own feelings in response to the self-harming of the person you care for. Try not to let them spill out as anger at the person.
- It can really help to find someone to talk to, and to share your concerns, frustration and hopes.
- Make use of support groups, helplines and online information and forums.

Keep the lines of communication open, find the strategies that really work for them, ask how you can help in that moment and don't be afraid of talking about it.

Don't feel ashamed or that you're to blame, your child will pick up on this.

Susie



Getting professional help


If you are concerned about someone you should seek further help, particularly if:

- The self-harm or distress is increasing in frequency or intensity
- You notice additional problems such as anxiety, low mood or thoughts of suicide
- They are experiencing frequent meltdowns or shutdowns.



Sources of help include:

- Their GP is the first person to contact. They can refer a child or young person to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) for an assessment. This may result in a plan for support and treatment. Adults may be referred to one of the local Mental Health services.
- If a child or young person goes to hospital for any reason related to self-harm, they should be seen by someone who can talk to them about their self-harm. They may also arrange a mental health assessment. If it is not clear whether this has happened, ask the staff and clarify what is offered.
- There are specialist charities or counselling providers in your area who support people who self-harm. There are a range of telephone helplines and online support forums which can also provide support.



Don't be ashamed or embarrassed about the scars for they are battle wounds and in time will be a reminder of how far you have come.

Jennifer

Information and support for Parents and Carers

Young Minds youngminds.org.uk 0808 802 5544.

Available to offer advice to parents and carers worried about a child or young person under 25.

Alumina selfharm.co.uk

Information, and a weekly online self-help course for young people 11-19, running over 7 weeks.

Mind mind.org.uk

Papyrus papyrus-uk.org

Anna Freud Centre annafreud.org

Information and resources for families on a variety of topics, including self-harm

MindEd mindedforfamilies.org.uk

Free online courses for parents and carers on mental health issues, as well as lots of information and resources

24/7 Support

Shout Text SHOUT to 85258

Samaritans 116 123

Childline 0800 1111

Papyrus 0800 068 4141

NHS 111 Option 2



Online Support

Side by Side sidebyside.mind.org.uk – Mind's online community.

Kooth kooth.com – Online support including one to one, discussion and information. (Not available in all locations).

National Self-Harm Network nshn.co.uk – The forum provides support, information, resources, advice, discussions and distractions

Recover Your Life recoveryourlife.com
Information, as well as support forums

Self Injury Support selfinjurysupport.org.uk
Information, as well as support forums

Local Support

Your GP, school or other support organisation can make a referral to local support, or Child and Adolescent NHS Mental Health Services. Self-referral is available in some areas.

Resources and Apps

Stem4 Apps and information to support young people and parents stem4.org.uk.



DistrACT A thorough app covering distraction techniques, self-help, and where to get help.



Calm Harm Free app to help you manage the urge to self-harm.



First Aid Download the Red Cross First Aid App.



Tell Mi Peer support via the app, pre-moderated by professionals.

National Support, Advice and Information

Alumina selfharm.co.uk Information, and a weekly online course for young people 11-19, running over 7 weeks.

Beat Eating Disorders beateatingdisorders.org.uk Information, advice, helpline and online support groups.

Harmless harmless.org.uk Information and support includes the Tomorrow Project.

LifeSigns lifesigns.org.uk Practical and real life Information, guidance and online support.

The Mix themix.org.uk Advice and support for under 25s on many issues including self-harm.

Papyrus 0800 068 4141 24/7 papyrus-uk.org Support for young people with thoughts of suicide.

Recover Your Life recoveryourlife.com Information, as well as support forums.

SANEline sane.org.uk Out-of-hours mental health helpline including family, friends and carers. Support for 16+. 4pm-10pm on 0300 304 7000.

Young Minds 0808 802 5544 youngminds.org.uk Thorough and practical information and advice about young people's mental health includes information on medication and parent's helpline.

“There were times when I desperately wanted people to notice that I was self-harming, that I was wearing long sleeves for a reason and that I wasn't eating. But at the same time, I was dreading that somebody would notice. Back then, I needed someone to notice, and I needed that attention and support.”

Ellie

Ideas for Distractions

DistrACT and **Calm Harm** two apps to help you manage the urge to self-harm.

Wellbeing and Coping wellbeingandcoping.net

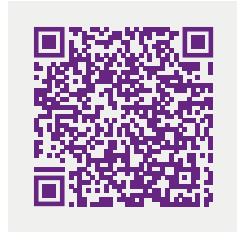
Scan the QR codes to see more ideas here:



Mind



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**Every
life
matters** ●●●

www.every-life-matters.org.uk

Suicide Safer Communities, Training and
Suicide Bereavement Support in Cumbria
Charity No. 1180815