

# Improving the lives of people who self-harm



Public Health  
Agency



# Introduction

This leaflet is for anyone who wants to understand self-harm. It will be useful if you are harming yourself, or feel that you might do so. We hope it will also be helpful for your friends and family.

## Contents

### Part A: Information for the person who self-harms.

This includes:

- what self-harm is;
- why someone might do it;
- what you can do to help yourself;
- what help is available.

### Part B: Information for families, carers and/or friends.

This includes:

- what friends and family can do to help.

### Part C: Getting help in a crisis.

On pages 11-12 there is important guidance on what to do in a crisis situation, along with a list of services, helplines and websites that can give you more information and support.

## Acknowledgement

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# Part A: Information for the person who self-harms

## What is self-harm?

The term 'self-harm' is used to describe a range of things that people do to themselves. Self-harm can involve:

- hurting or injuring your body (often this is hidden from view);
- harming yourself by overdosing on medication or swallowing poisonous substances.

A person might harm themselves on a number of occasions using different methods each time. Other people may find it difficult to understand why someone harms themselves, but we know that self-harm is usually caused by high emotion, distress and unbearable inner turmoil.

Some people plan self-harm in advance. For others, it happens on the spur of the moment. Some people self-harm only once or twice, but others do it regularly. It can be hard to stop.

Some people harm themselves in less obvious ways. Their behaviour may suggest they don't care whether they live or die.

## Is self-harm the same as attempted suicide?

People self-harm for their own reasons. Most people who self-harm do not want to die. They will say they harm themselves to cope with distressing feelings. But sometimes a person who self-harms can be very serious about wanting to die. Many people who take their own lives have self-harmed in the past, so anyone who self-harms should be taken seriously and offered help.

## Who self-harms?

Self-harm can affect people of all ages and backgrounds. It happens more often among:

- people who misuse alcohol and other drugs;
- young people;
- prisoners, asylum seekers and armed forces veterans;
- gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people – this seems, at least in part, due to the stress of prejudice and discrimination;
- people who have experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse during childhood;
- people who find it very difficult to talk about their feelings.

Current statistics for hospital treated self-harm in Northern Ireland are available in the Northern Ireland Registry of Self-harm Regional Report 2020/21 and 2021/22, which is available on the Public Health Agency website at: [www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/northern-ireland-registry-self-harm-regional-report-202021-and-202122](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/northern-ireland-registry-self-harm-regional-report-202021-and-202122)

## What causes some people to self-harm?

Many people who harm themselves are struggling with significant distress or very difficult situations. A person will often struggle with difficulties for some time before they begin to self-harm.

Problems that can sometimes lead to self-harm include:

- feeling depressed or very sad;
- feeling bad about yourself;
- relationship problems with partners, friends and/or family;
- physical, emotional or sexual abuse;
- being unemployed, or having difficulties at work or school;

- money problems;
- being bullied;
- long-term psychological and physical health issues.

People who self-harm often feel:

- that people don't listen to them;
- hopeless;
- angry;
- isolated and alone;
- out of control;
- numb;
- powerless – it feels like there is nothing they can do to change their situation.

People who self-harm may do it to distract from an inner pain. Some may even want to punish themselves because they feel responsible for things in the past.

Most people self-harm in private and often others don't know about it. Sometimes people harm themselves to show someone else how distressed they are.

**You are more likely to self-harm if you are using alcohol or other drugs as these can make you take bigger risks or do things that you wouldn't normally do. Self-harm can be more dangerous at these times because you may do it more frequently and more severely than you really intend to.**

## **If I have self-harmed or thought about it, do I need help?**

Sometimes people who self-harm feel they can't ask for help or don't realise they need help.

You may be:

- feeling very sad or depressed;
- unsure of yourself or afraid;
- finding it difficult to get on with other people;
- having problems with alcohol and/or other drugs.

You may be aware that you need help but don't feel you can tell anyone.

You may have spoken about your problems but feel that no-one is listening to you.

You may think you don't need help and see self-harm as a way to cope with things going on in your life.

**Getting help and support could really help you with these feelings and problems.**

**See pages 11-12 for important guidance on what to do in a crisis situation, along with a list of services, helplines and websites that can give you more information and support.**

## Warning signs

You should get immediate help to deal with your problems if you are:

- harming yourself in a serious way;
- harming yourself regularly;
- having thoughts of suicide;
- misusing alcohol and/or drugs;
- isolated and spending too much time alone;
- struggling with a mental illness.

**See pages 11-12 for important guidance on what to do in a crisis situation, along with a list of services, helplines and websites that can give you more information and support.**

## What help is there?

- **Talk to your GP or another professional**

Talking to your GP is a good place to start. Bring this leaflet with you and show it to the doctor. Your GP can tell you about the services available in your area and refer you for further help if necessary.

There are a range of services available within the health sector and in the local community, both for people who self-harm and their families/carers. If you don't want to speak to your GP, you can contact other services directly. See the list of services on page 12 of this leaflet.

**Asking for help is a sign of strength not weakness**

- **Talk to someone you trust**

You may find it helpful to talk to someone else privately about your feelings. This can help you feel less isolated with your problems. It can also help you think about your difficulties more clearly – maybe even see ways of solving them that you wouldn't think of on your own. Some helplines are listed on page 12 of this leaflet.

- **Family support**

In some cases, it may help to have a family meeting with a professional or therapist. This can help everyone understand self-harm and the reasons behind it. However, this might not always be appropriate, for instance if your family circumstances have caused, or are causing, your self-harm.

## **What works best?**

There is evidence that some 'talking therapies', eg problem-solving therapy, psychodynamic therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) are useful in helping people who harm themselves. A health professional will make suggestions based on an assessment of your individual problems and what is available locally. In some cases, for example when someone has a diagnosis of 'personality disorder', more intensive therapies may be required.

## **How can I help myself when I have the urge to self-harm?**

Try to put off hurting yourself for a while as the feelings are likely to go away. Anything you can do to distract yourself from self-harming or make yourself feel better will help. Some options to consider:

- Talk to someone – if you are on your own, perhaps you could phone a friend. Alternatively some helplines are listed at the back of this leaflet.
- Write down your feelings. No one else needs to see it and you can destroy it afterwards.
- Try to relax and focus your mind on something pleasant – your personal comforting place.



- Try to focus your mind on positive things.
- Be kind to yourself – do something that you enjoy, eg listen to music.

When the urge to self-harm has gone and you feel safe, it might be a good time to talk to someone and try to get some longer-term support. This can help you develop new ways of coping without harming yourself.

We recognise that some people find it difficult to stop self-harming. If you continue to harm yourself, it is important to take care of your injuries and reduce the damage to your body. **If you are finding it hard to stop self-harming, it is very important to talk to a professional who understands your situation and who can help you deal with your problems.**

## **What if I self-harm and need treatment at the hospital?**

If you attend an Emergency Department, you will be treated for any physical injuries or the effects of an overdose. You will also be able to speak to a health professional who knows about self-harm, either at the time or possibly through an appointment the following day.

They will talk to you about how you are feeling and the difficulties you are having. They should be able to assess all your needs properly, whatever they may be, and offer you some advice and support.

You don't have to tell the Emergency Department receptionist the reason you are attending if you prefer not to. You can say that you prefer to tell the nurse.

You have the right to be treated with courtesy, compassion and respect in a caring and non-judgmental manner by the doctors and nurses in the Emergency Department.

**It is a good idea to have a friend or family member come along with you to the Emergency Department.**

# Part B: Information for families, carers and/or friends

## What can I do if I know someone who self-harms?

It can be very upsetting if someone close to you self-harms, but there are things you can do. The most important is to listen to the person without judging them or being critical. This can be very hard if you are upset or angry yourself. Try to concentrate on the person rather than your own feelings, even though this can be hard.

### Do

- Listen to what they have to say without judgment and try to understand their feelings.
- Show compassion and kindness.
- Acknowledge that it may be difficult for the person to stop self-harming.
- Talk to them calmly, in a way that shows how much you care about them.
- Take some of the mystery out of self-harm by helping them find out more about it, perhaps by showing them this leaflet, or by searching appropriate websites or the local library.
- Find out about getting help – maybe go with them to see someone, such as their GP or other service.
- Help them think about their self-harm not as a shameful secret, but as something that can be understood and helped.
- Get support for yourself too. Remember you don't have to cope with this alone. See the list of services at the back of this leaflet.

### Don't

- Don't try to be their therapist – therapy is complicated and you have enough to deal with as their friend, partner or relative.

- Don't expect them to stop overnight – it's difficult and takes time and effort.
- Don't react strongly, getting angry, hurt or upset – this is likely to make them feel worse.
- Don't make them feel guilty by dwelling on the effect their self-harm has on you or anyone else.
- Don't struggle with them when they are about to self-harm.
- Don't make them promise not to do it again.
- Don't say that you won't talk to them unless they stop self-harming.
- Don't feel responsible for their self-harm or become the person who is supposed to stop them. Try to get them to the next responsible person, eg GP, other professional or hospital. There is support available so you don't have to cope with this alone.

## Part C: Getting help in a crisis

**If you have done something to seriously harm yourself, you should go to a hospital Emergency Department or call 999 if more urgent assistance is required.**

If you have not harmed yourself but feel you are at risk of suicide or need to speak to someone urgently about your mental health, you can:

- make an emergency appointment with your GP or GP out-of-hours service (see page 12) – the GP can arrange for you to see someone from the mental health team urgently;
- go to a hospital Emergency Department;
- call the emergency numbers in your Care Plan (people who are being treated for a mental illness may have a Care Plan that has emergency contact details).

# Useful contacts

## Emergencies

Call 999

## GP out-of-hours services

North & West Belfast	028 9074 4447
South & East Belfast	028 9079 6220
Southern Trust Area	028 3839 9201
North Down & Ards	028 9182 2344
Lisburn & Downpatrick	028 9260 2204
Northern Trust Area	028 2566 3500
Western Trust Area	028 7186 5195

## Helplines

### Lifeline

If you, or someone you know, is in distress or despair, call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000.



Calls are free (Deaf people and those with hearing difficulties or speech impairment can call Textphone: 18001 808 8000).

Calls to Lifeline are answered by trained counsellors who can provide help and support. Counsellors are experienced in dealing with self-harm, suicidal thoughts and many other issues. Lines are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Samaritans

Tel: 116 123

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### Childline

Tel: 0800 1111

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

## Local support organisations

A full list of support services in your area can be found in your local *Directory of services to help improve mental health and emotional wellbeing*, which is available at: [www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/directory-services-help-improve-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/directory-services-help-improve-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing)

Alternatively you can visit the Minding Your Head website for a list of local services. [www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)

## External websites

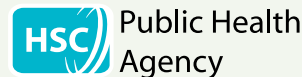
Take care using websites as occasionally they can appear to encourage self-harm. Some people who have self-harmed have found the following websites useful:

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health)

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

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

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



### Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

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