

I am working with someone who self-harms...

A guide for professionals

Contents

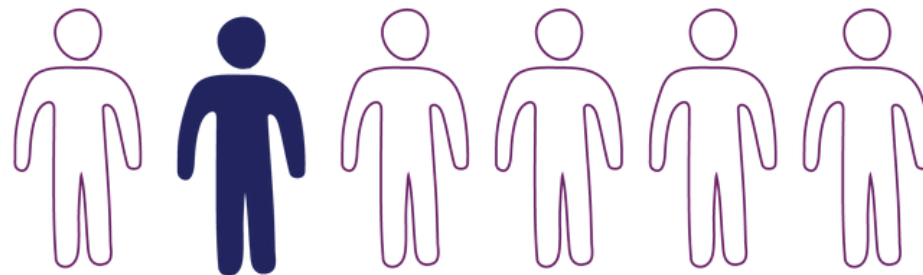
Introduction	3	Starting the conversation	14
What is self-harm?	4	Identifying triggers	19
Types of self-harm	5	Alternatives to self-harm	20
Signs of self-harm	6	Looking after yourself	22
Why do people self-harm?	7	Useful resources	24
The cycle of self-harm	9	First aid	25
How can I support?	12	Frequently asked questions	26
Try to... try not to...	13		

Introduction

Self-harm affects people of all ages and genders. There is no such thing as an archetypal person who self-harms. Research does however indicate that young people are most at risk, and that approximately **1 in 6 young people in Scotland have self-harmed**. Some research suggests that this is a conservative estimate.

The reasons why a person self-harms are unique to each individual. Self-harm is an expression of a person's feeling of stress, anger, frustration, shame, being "at a loss", or other feelings of distress. Self-harm is often a response to an underlying problem and is often described as a way of coping with associated distress.

We know it can be difficult to be a professional who is supporting someone who self-harms. We also know that with good, compassionate support, there is real hope for people who self-harm. Accessing the right support at the right time is critical. This booklet is designed to give you some information and resources you can use to support the person you're working with, and yourself, on their self-harm journey.

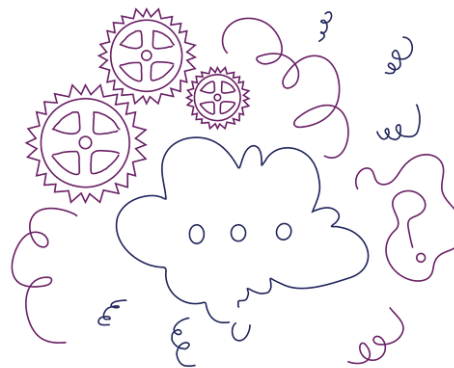


What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm is a non-accidental, non-suicidal behaviour which causes, or has the potential to cause, damage to a person. Self-harm is where someone hurts themselves as a way of coping with difficult or distressing feelings and circumstances. Many people who self-harm describe it as an “outlet” for the emotional pain they might be feeling, or that it helps them to feel something when they feel numb.

Who self-harms?

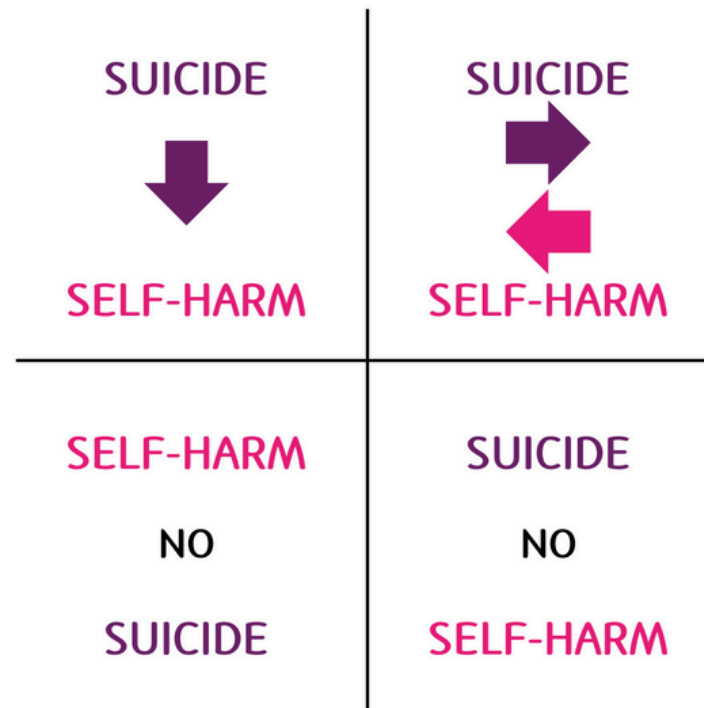
There are lots of assumptions that self-harm only affects certain people. However, self-harm can affect people from all walks of life. People can be affected by self-harm regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation, employment or mental health status.



Self-Harm and Suicide

Although some people who self-harm may have thoughts about suicide, this is not always the case. Self-harm tends to be a coping strategy which may actually help prevent a person from contemplating suicide. A key distinction is that self-harm is often about experiencing and expressing feelings, whereas a suicide attempt often expresses a desire to no longer experience feelings. The graphic below shows how suicide and self-harm can be linked for some people, but not for others.

For some people, self-harm is the coping strategy they use to deal with suicidal feelings, so for those people we can identify a link between self-harm and suicide.



For some people, their thoughts around self-harm and suicide are not always linked. People can experience suicidal thoughts AND be self-harming, but they can be for different, unrelated reasons.

There are people who have self-harmed who have never felt suicidal, as not everyone who self-harms feels suicidal.

There are people who have felt suicidal, attempted suicide, or died by suicide that have never self-harmed.

Produced in collaboration with the British Deaf Association

Types of Self-Harm

There are many different types of self-harm. Some people use the same one all of the time whilst others may use different types at different times. Here are some more and lesser known types of self-harm. These are just some of the forms of self-harm. Self-harm is a very personal form of coping strategy and the type of self-harm can often hold a specific purpose or function for them.



Signs of self-harm

Professionals are often worried that they don't know what to look out for when they are worried about someone self-harming. We put together this list with some signs that can indicate that someone might be harming themselves:



Some other signs could include a sudden increase in appetite, sudden weight gain/loss, and going to the gym excessively. It is important to remember that there may be a number of reasons why a person might be showing any of these signs, and that it might not necessarily mean they are self-harming. You can use this information, along with the information in our 'Starting the Conversation' resource on page 14, to help you speak to the person about your concerns

Why do people self-harm?

Self-harm is a coping strategy which helps people to deal with distressing thoughts and emotions. One of the main things to remember is that self-harm does have a purpose as a coping strategy. The purpose of self-harm is often known as the function of self-harm. Before we can start to look at alternative coping strategies, we first need to find out what the function of the person's self-harm is. The function of the self-harm can help us understand our loved one's needs. Everyone is different, so for some people self-harm might have more than one function. Others might identify more strongly with one function. Below is a list of some of the ways in which self-harm can function as a coping strategy:

- **Communication**

When someone finds it too hard to verbalise their emotions, sometimes they can let others know how they are feeling through their behaviours. It may also be easier for them to talk about the act of self-harm, rather than about how they are feeling.

- **Emotional regulation/release of feelings**

Most people who self-harm tend to hold their feelings inside, or try to ignore them. People can only bottle up their feelings for so long before they eventually become overwhelming. It is often at these times that a person is most likely to self-harm. When someone self-harms, a chemical reaction occurs in their bodies which leads to them feeling a sense of calm and relief.

- **Control**

For some people, how often they hurt themselves, or the ways that they hurt themselves, may be the only things in their life that they feel they have control over.

- **Self-punishment**

when feelings of guilt, blame, frustration, happiness and contentedness are very powerful, some people may use self-harm as a way to punish themselves if they do not understand why it is distressing or overwhelming.

Why to people self-harm? Cont.

- **Distraction**

Self harm can take the focus away from an emotional pain that might feel more confusing, overwhelming and difficult to deal with.

- **Cleansing**

For some people, self-harm can give them a way to feel that they are getting rid of bad experiences.

- **Comfort and nurture**

For some people, self-harming and then taking care of their injuries gives them an opportunity to provide care and nurture for themselves that they might not feel they are able to do in other ways.

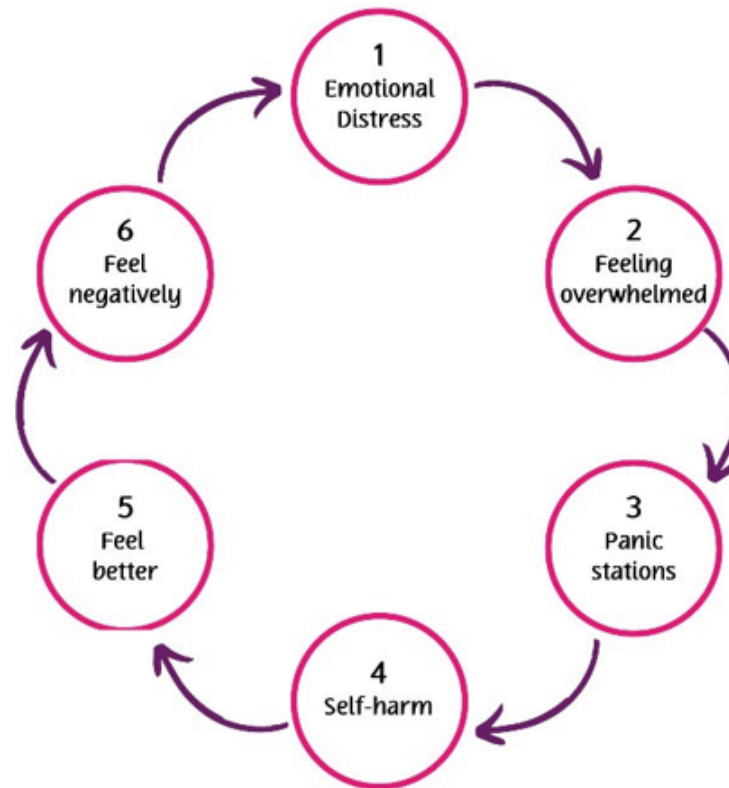
- **Feeling real or alive**

Sometimes people's life experiences leave them feeling numb, empty, dead or unreal. For some people, hurting their body, or taking part in a risky behaviour, are ways of breaking through these feelings and experiencing something that makes them feel real and connected to reality again.

Once we have identified the function of the self-harm, we can start to look at identifying an alternative coping strategy which the person you are supporting feels may hold a similar function. It's important to remember again that everyone is different and will have different functions for different coping strategies. It is also important to remember to move at a pace that is comfortable for the person you are supporting. Supporting someone who self-harms can be a long process and it important to listen to their needs, whilst also supporting yourself.

The cycle of self-harm

Self-harm is a coping strategy that is used to help people deal with distressing thoughts and emotions. Self-harm can help release overwhelming emotions and can allow a person to feel present and connected to reality again. However, the release of these overwhelming emotions is often only temporary. The act of self-harm can lead to feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and shame. These negative emotions can then cause the original overwhelming emotions to return, which can lead to further self-harm. This is commonly known as the cycle of self-harm. Below is a diagram of the cycle of self-harm with descriptions of each stage in the cycle:



The cycle of self-harm cont.

1. Emotional distress

This is when a person starts to feel emotionally distressed. The distress could come from remembering distressing or traumatic events, or could be from negative feelings that they have about themselves. They could also be feeling numb or disconnected from reality. Often these feelings can be confusing, and the person might not know where the feelings are coming from, or why they feel this way.

2. Feeling overwhelmed

The distressing emotions that the person is feeling become overwhelming. They can feel that their emotions are trapped inside with no way to release them.

3. Panic stations

The distressing emotions reach the point where the person feels they aren't able to control them. They feel the urge to self-harm.

4. Self-harm

The person self-harms. The emotional distress is reduced and the person feels more in control. Self-harm is a coping strategy and for each person the self-harm will hold a specific function. As everyone is different, the function of the self-harm could be different from person to person.

The cycle of self-harm cont.

5. Feel better

The person has managed to bring their emotional distress to a level that they can manage. However, this feeling is only temporary. A person could stay at this point for days, weeks or months, or they might only stay at this point for a few hours.

6. Feel negatively

The person begins to feel negatively about harming themselves. They can feel guilt, shame, numbness or anger at themselves for having self-harmed. These negative emotions lead back to point 1 and the cycle continues.

The best time to have a conversation about self-harm is when the person is at point 5. At point 5, the person will be calmer and will feel more emotionally balanced. Once the cycle has started again, it can be very difficult to break it. Self-harm is a coping strategy and, when a person is in extreme emotional distress, sometimes self-harm feels like their only option. If we try and intervene them at point 2, 3 or 4, we are essentially taking away their coping strategy. This could cause them to harm themselves in other ways that may be less familiar to them, which could be more dangerous. It could also lead to distrust between you and the person, which could lead to them being more secretive.



Cycle adapted from the Sutton, J. (2007). Healing the Hurt Within: Understand Self-injury and Self-harm, and Heal the Emotional Wounds. 3Rev Ed edition. Oxford: How To Books p.187

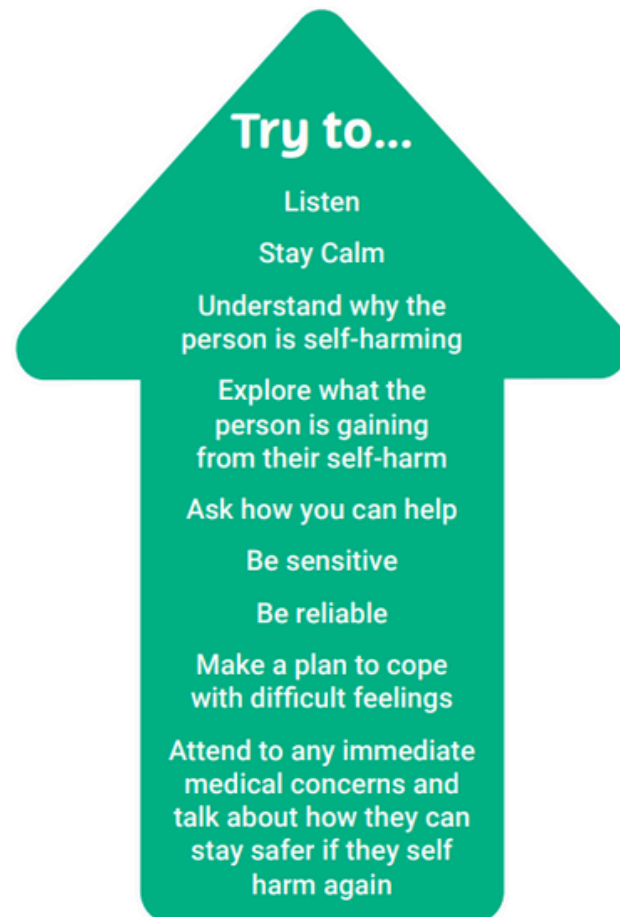
How can I support?

Learning that someone you are working with self-harms can be stressful and difficult to come to terms with. You might also feel like you do not know where to turn to and how to go about supporting the person. Remember, everyone is unique and therefore different ways of support work for different people. We have put together some guidance on ways that you can offer support to someone who self-harms. Remember to be flexible – you can change your support if the person does not find it beneficial.



Try to...try not to...

There is lots of different advice out there for how to respond to self-harm. We have put together this resource with some quick tips to help you know which responses may be helpful, and those that might not be so helpful, when supporting someone who is self-harming.

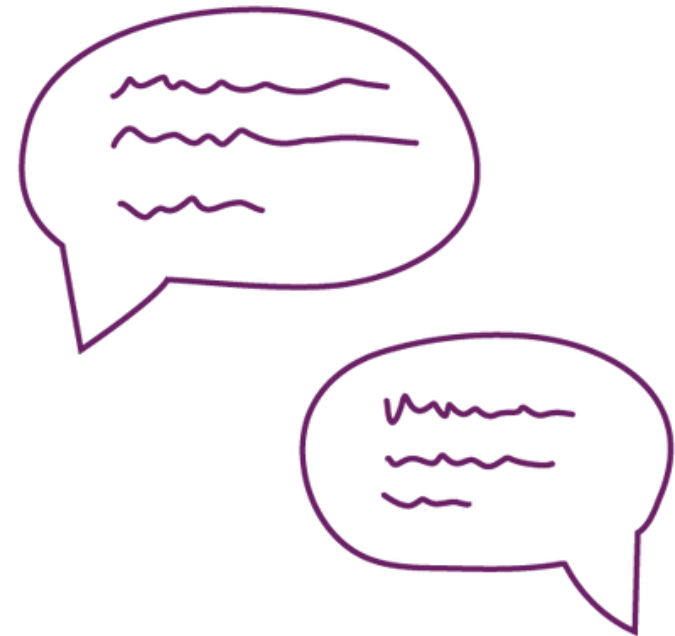


Starting the conversation

Having conversations about mental health can be difficult, and self-harm can be especially difficult to talk about. It is a very personal and emotional topic for both the person who is self-harming and for the people who are trying to support them. You might feel like you don't know how to go about supporting someone, or even how to start the conversation. We have put together this resource to give you some tips on how to start a conversation about self-harm.

Don't avoid the subject

If we suspect or learn that someone we work with is self-harming, it can be stressful and difficult to come to terms with. We are often worried that we will make the situation worse by asking. However, people who self-harm often report that they do not mind being asked, if the person asking is sensitive and is trying to understand. Avoiding the subject might cause the person to believe that they cannot talk to you about their self-harm and this could increase feelings of stress, guilt and loneliness. Instead, let the person know that you are willing to talk about it. However, it is important to follow their lead. Respect their space and let them know that they can start a conversation about it when they feel ready.



Starting the conversation cont.

Time

When starting a conversation about self-harm, it is helpful to pick a time when you know that you will have plenty of time to talk. Self-harm can be very hard to talk about, so having enough time will give the person space to think and will make the conversation easier. We can't always control when someone might want to speak to us about self-harm, and sometimes they might ask to speak to you at a time when you can't give them enough of your time. The person you are supporting might open up about their self-harm in a way that doesn't allow time for a full conversation as a way to keep themselves safe. It's completely natural to feel like you should drop everything to have this conversation in the moment, but that is not always practical or appropriate. In cases like this, it's important to assure that person that you are interested in what they have to say, but you want to make sure that you have time to give them the attention they deserve. You can then arrange a time that suits you both to have a conversation. This will help the person to know that you care and want to dedicate time to them.

Space

It's important to create a safe space for the person to talk to you about self-harm. It is helpful to try and find a space that is private and where you will not be disturbed. The space can be at your workplace, in the community or somewhere else that the person might feel safe and comfortable. Involving the person in choosing where would make them feel comfortable will reassure them that you are serious about listening to them and their needs.



Starting the conversation cont.

Listen

It's important in a conversation about self-harm that we are there to listen. This is a chance for the person to open up about what is happening in their life at the moment. You might be the first person they have spoken to about self-harm, so it is important for them to feel heard. Listening to their reasoning can also help you put things into perspective and be more understanding towards them. When we are talking to people about self-harm we often, understandably, want to ask a lot of questions. Try not to jump in and take control, or ask too many questions. Instead, let the person talk, and they will most likely cover your questions anyway. Ask them what they need from you, and listen to their needs.

Manage your reactions

During a conversation about self-harm you might experience a range of emotions, such as shock, denial, anger, frustration and potentially even guilt. However, being confrontational, judgmental or overly emotional might make the situation worse. It is important to try to remain calm. Try and imagine what the person might feel like opening up to you about their self-harm. They are trying to cope with their feelings and this time needs to be about them and not about yourself. This does not mean that you have to internalise your feelings and thoughts, so please make sure you have appropriate support networks in place to help you cope with the situation.



Starting the conversation cont.

Find the best way to communicate

Having long, face-to-face conversations about self-harm can be very difficult for some people. It can be helpful to talk to the person about other ways that they can communicate with you. You might want to text each other, leave notes for each other, voice note each other or send emails or letters. This allows time for both sides to read or listen to the messages and reflect on them before sending a response. It can also feel less intimidating to the person as it sometimes is easier to write down how we are feeling. It can also help you as a professional, as you do not have to worry about your initial reaction.

Take it slow

When having conversations about self-harm, we often want to fix things right away. Remember that self-harm is an emotionally sensitive subject and the person might not feel comfortable, or be able to open up right away. They might not know why they self-harm, what triggers their self-harm or what they want to do about their self-harm. Good communication is important, but it is equally as important to know when to step away and give the person some space. This will help them to make sense of their thoughts and allow them to reflect on what has been happening. Remember that this is just the first conversation on the recovery journey, so don't get disheartened when things aren't fixed straight away.



Starting the conversation cont.

Don't ask them to stop self-harming

Wanting someone to stop self-harming is extremely natural and many people do stop self-harming with the right support. However, this can take time as it usually requires a “trial and error” process for the person to find which ways of coping work for them and which ones do not. Although it may be difficult for us to know that someone is harming themselves, it is important to remember that the self-harm is a coping strategy for them. Taking their coping strategy away will not solve the problem, it will only take away their way of coping with what is happening in their life. This might increase feelings of guilt and lead to more distress for the person

Seek support

This might be support for the person self-harming or for yourself. Some people find it easier to open up to someone who is not involved in their daily life. Make sure to talk about this option with the person and confirm that they are happy to take this step. This does not mean that they are never going to talk to you about their self-harm and feelings, but it might offer them a safe space to talk about it for the first time. You might also wish to seek support for yourself. Supporting someone who self-harms can be overwhelming and it is important to look after yourself as well. It might feel “wrong” to do this as you might feel you have to focus all your attention on the other person, but it is absolutely okay and necessary to look after your own wellbeing too. See our Looking After Yourself resource on page 22 for more tips on managing your own wellbeing whilst supporting someone who self-harms.



Identifying triggers

Identifying triggers can be important when trying to address self-harming behaviour. A trigger is something that may be causing the person to become overwhelmed and lead to self-harm. Possible triggers are:

- Pressure at school/work
- Bullying
- Financial worries
- Abuse
- Bereavement
- Relationship break-up
- Questions around sexuality/gender identity
- Health worries
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Anger
- Underlying mental illness
- Feeling numb
- Desire to express feelings
- Traumatic events
- Loss of control
- Feeling stressed
- Loss of a job

If the person you are supporting would like this type of support, you can try and support them to identify any potential triggers by talking to them and logging/keeping a diary when they have felt triggered. There is a self-harm diary template available on our online portal that the person might find helpful. It is also important to remember that they may not be aware of what triggers them to self-harm. This is something that can take a while to figure out, so it is important to be patient with them and continue to offer support as they work through it.

Alternatives to self-harm

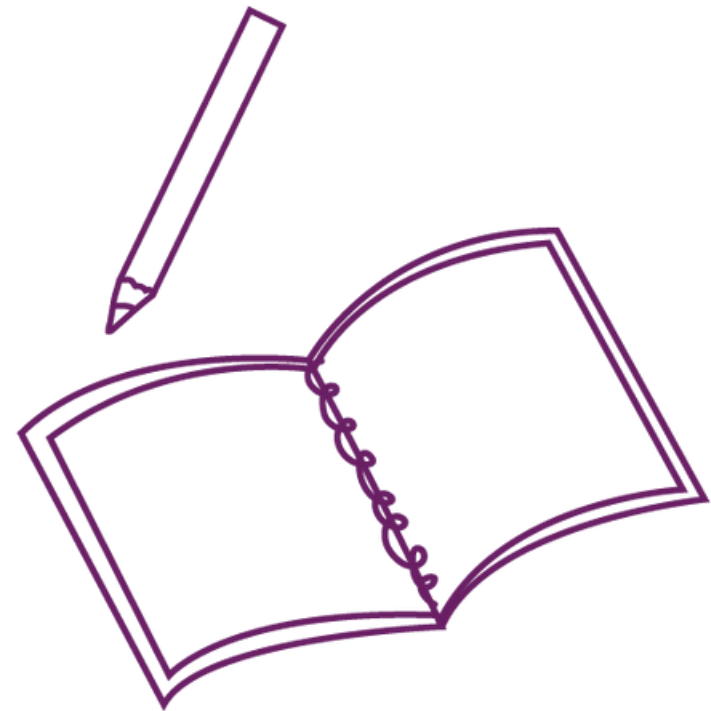
If the person you are supporting is looking to stop self-harming, you can work with them to start to identify healthy coping strategies. This can offer them an alternative to self-harm when they experience emotional distress. We have listed some alternatives to self-harm below. These alternatives have all been suggested by people who have self-harmed.

Contact a friend or helpline 	Go to the gym 	Go for a run 
Listen to music or dance around 	Use a punching bag 	Practice a sport or swim 
Go for a walk 	Write a diary or do some art 	Use an ice cube or elastic band 
Do something for others/practice kindness 	Spend time with friends 	Value yourself Use positive affirmations and positive thinking 

Alternatives to self-harm cont.

Having conversations when the person you are supporting is in a calm space will help them to be able to identify alternative coping strategies more easily. When a person is in a place of extreme emotional distress and overwhelm, it can be really hard for them to think of something that makes them feel better. Many people report that it is very helpful to have alternatives written down ahead of time so that they can then refer to them when they are feeling distressed.

Because we are all individual and unique, the strategies that work for each of us will be different. There is no way to know for sure what will be helpful until we give things a try. At times, this trial and error can feel frustrating, but it is a very natural process and is a positive sign that the person is working towards positive coping strategies in the long run. Often, finding an alternative that relates to the function of the person's self-harm can be very helpful. For example, if they use self-harm as a way to communicate their difficult emotions, they could maybe try something like journaling or writing a letter. Remember, reducing or stopping self-harm can take a long time, don't get disheartened if it takes longer than you initially thought.

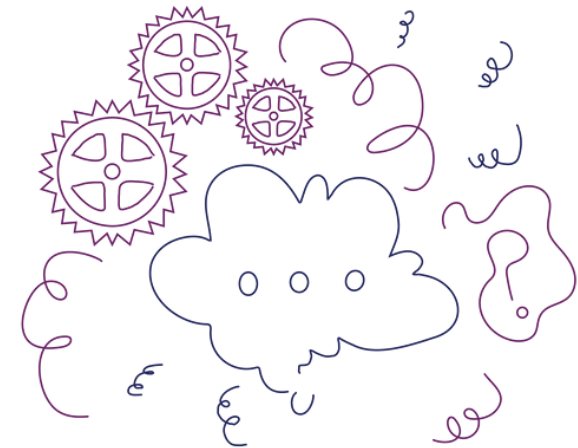


Looking after yourself

Having conversations with anyone about their mental health can be extremely difficult. Self-harm in particular can be a very difficult and emotional topic to discuss. Supporting someone who self-harms can be very stressful and can take a toll on your mental health and wellbeing. We have put together these tips on how to look after yourself while you are supporting someone who self-harms.

Acknowledge your feelings

Supporting someone who self-harms can bring up a range of emotions, such as sadness, anger, frustration, disgust and guilt. When having conversations about self-harm with the person you are supporting, it is important to keep their feelings at the centre of the conversation. However, this doesn't mean that you should ignore your feelings or try to push them down. It is important for you to have someone you can talk to about these feelings to help you stay safe, mentally well and to be able to continue to support the person who is self-harming.



Boundaries

Supporting someone who is self-harming can be a long process with many ups and downs and we might feel that we need to commit to being there for every step. Having an open, realistic conversation with the person about how and when you can support them will be helpful for the person you are supporting, but also help to keep yourself safe and mentally well.

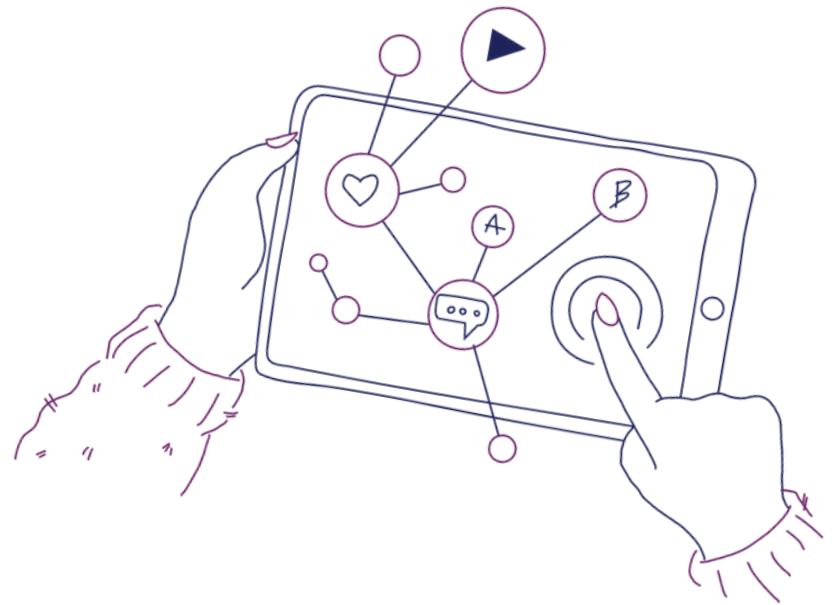
Looking after yourself cont.

Know your limits

There are lots of different steps on the recovery journey, and the journey will look different for each person who self-harms. You may want to be the person who supports them through every step on their journey, but sometimes that is not possible. There may come a time on their journey where they need support from someone else, or it's a part of the journey that you just can't help with. Knowing the limitations of what you can realistically do to support the person who is self-harming will not only help them to get the right support, but will allow you to feel comfortable in the level of support that you can give.

Get support and information

It is really important that you have a support system in place to help you as you support the person who is self-harming. This could be a supervisor, manager, colleagues or even professional support. There are lots of helpful resources and information available for those supporting people who self-harm, and there are organisations that are there to give you support and someone to talk to.



Useful Resources



Breathing Space

Open up when you're feeling down

Confidential phone line
for people who need
someone to talk to

breathingspace.scot

0800 83 85 87

childline

ONLINE, ON THE PHONE, ANYTIME
childline.org.uk | 0800 1111

Helpline for
Children and
Young People

childline.org.uk

0800 11 11

SAMARITANS

Samaritans: 24 hour confidential
phone line for people who need
someone to talk to

samaritans.org

116 123



Self-Injury Guidance & Network Support

User-led voluntary
organisation creating
understanding
about self-injury

lifesigns.org.uk

HandsOn

Practical information, tools and
activities to respond helpfully to
troubling behaviours and to help
children and young people flourish

handsonscotland.co.uk

Penumbra
Mental Health

Information on
Self-Harm Services
penumbra.org.uk

First aid

PHONE 999 for severe cuts, burns, shock,
drowsiness or unconsciousness

Taking care of injuries is really important. These basic first aid tips can assist anyone to care for a variety of different injuries. However, if you are in doubt, always seek medical advice. For many people it can be empowering to know how to look after themselves. It may be a good idea to show the person you are supporting where they can access first aid supplies. This way they can take care of their injuries without needing to ask for help first, which can give them a sense of control.



Cuts & Wounds

Cover the wound

Apply **pressure** to the area

Lift the affected area above
head height



Overdose

Check **consciousness** -
turn on side if

drowsy and stay with them

Identify what taken, how
much and when

Re-assure by speaking
quietly and calmly



Burns

Cool the affected are with
cold running water

Remove jewellery and
clothes (if not sticking)

Cover with cling film/clean
plastic bag



Distress

Listen carefully

Speak calmly

Ask how you can help

Frequently asked questions

How can I help?

Stay calm and reassure them that you are there to listen. Try not to focus too much on the self-harm, but more on how they are feeling. Ask them how they were feeling before they self-harmed and how the self-harm may be helping. It can be helpful for both of you to understand the underlying emotions and reasons for self-harm, but this can take some time. Try not to rush trying to 'get to the bottom of things'.

Should I check in with them if I see them regularly?

It is natural to want to check in with the person you are supporting after having a conversation about self-harm. The person might want to keep the conversation going at another time, or they might not want to speak about it again. It is important when you are checking in with the person that you ask about how they are feeling and what is going on for them in their life, rather than focusing on their self-harm.

Should I tell someone else that the person is self-harming?

You might feel like you want to talk to someone else about the person you are supporting that is self-harming. This could be because you are worried about the person you are supporting, or to get support for your own wellbeing. It is important to remember confidentiality and its limits in this situation. Self-harm is very personal, and information about the person's self-harm should only be shared on a need-to-know basis. It is also important to know the policies that your organisation has around reporting safeguarding issues. In some organisations, self-harm is required to be reported under Child Protection or Adult Support and Protection guidelines and policies, so it is important to check what your organisation's views are on this.

Frequently asked questions cont.

How can I get the person I am supporting to open up to me?

It can be very frustrating if the person you are supporting doesn't want to speak to you about why they are self-harming. This can be particularly difficult if you feel like you would usually have a good relationship with the person. Here are some tips for speaking to the person you are supporting in this situation:

- Focus on building your relationship first. Building trust and a sense of safety will help the person you are supporting to feel more comfortable to open up.
- Ask them about how things are going generally in their life and focus on how they are feeling.
- Try and encourage the person you are supporting not to spend too much time on their own. Help them to identify people they can spend time with and find ways to encourage them to become more involved in groups or other activities. Keep in mind that they might still need space and time to themselves, so try to find a balance.
- Try and have a conversation when you know you have time to talk, and find a space where you can have some privacy.
- If the person you are supporting does start opening up about their concerns, it is important not to interrupt them and jump to conclusions. Listen to them and hear what they have to say.
- They still may not want to speak to you. Remind them that you are there to talk if they change their mind in the future.
- You could suggest that they write you an email or letter, or text or voice note you if they are finding it difficult to talk face-to-face. You could also suggest that they speak to another trusted member of staff or volunteer if they might find this easier.

Remember, talking about self-harm can be very difficult. Try to encourage the person you are supporting, but keep in mind their need for space and time to process their feelings.

Frequently asked questions cont.

Will they eventually stop self-harming?

In most cases, self-harm is a temporary response to distress. Most people will, over time, find new coping mechanisms or find themselves in new life circumstances where they no longer feel the need to self-harm.

Is self-harm related to suicide?

Although some people who self-harm may have thoughts of suicide, this is not always the case. Self-harm is a coping strategy which helps prevent feelings going beyond what a person can cope with or understand fully, and can prevent a person contemplating suicide. The key is to remember one is about expressing and experiencing emotions in a way that is manageable for the person and the other is about not wanting to experience feelings or pain anymore.

What should I do if I am struggling to cope while supporting someone who self-harms?

Supporting anyone with their mental health can be extremely difficult. Supporting someone who self-harms can be particularly stressful and can take a toll on our mental health and wellbeing. Our Looking After Yourself resource has some tips on how to take care of yourself, as well as some resources that you can use to support your own mental health and wellbeing.



 selfharmnetworkscotland.org.uk

 SHNS@penumbra.org.uk

 Self-Harm Network Scotland

 SHNScotland

With thanks to those using Penumbra self-harm services and Penumbra self-harm staff for helping to put this pack together.