

What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm is defined as intentional self-poisoning or injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose. It is not necessarily suicidal behaviour, as for many it can be a coping mechanism without suicidal intent.

Self-harm can be a build-up of factors that leads to people wanting relief and a sense of control when enduring intense emotional pain and distress. Some reasons people self-harm may be:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Social isolation
- Inability to control emotions
- Experienced trauma
- Alcohol/drug issues
- Unemployment/work difficulties

For some self-harm is a way of preventing escalation of distress. Some plan it in advance, some act in the spur of the moment. It can be a one-time occurrence or a regular and sometimes addictive form of self-control.

Anyone can self-harm and, as it is often hidden, it is suggested that one in ten young people will self-harm at least once in their lives.

Due to the stigma around the topic, many can find it difficult to seek help and judgemental attitudes must be avoided.

Possible physical signs:

- Keeping skin covered at all times
- Unexplained cuts, bruises and burns
- Unexplained blood stains on clothing or tissues
- Signs of forced hair loss
- Excessive skin picking

Possible emotional signs:

- Becoming very withdrawn and unsociable
- Signs of depression
- Signs of low self-esteem
- Suicidal talk
- Posting negative comments online

What to do if someone is self-harming...

1. Treat them with respect, dignity and compassion
2. Work collaboratively with them to ensure their views are considered in decision making
3. Address any immediate physical health needs and call 111 or 999 if necessary
4. Seek advice from healthcare professionals or social care practitioners, which may include referral
5. Make them aware of outlets of support, such as NHS helplines, local authority teams and Samaritans
6. Address any safeguarding issues or refer to relevant safeguarding team

What to establish as soon as possible...

- The severity of the injury and how urgently treatment is needed
- Their level of distress and emotional and mental state
- Whether there is immediate concern for their safety
- Whether there are safeguarding concerns
- Whether there is a care plan
- If there is a need to refer to specialist mental health services for assessment

In an emergency dial 999.

Assess and respond with first aid to immediate risks and seek medical attention

If someone says they are feeling suicidal...

Stay calm, listen, take them seriously and share your concerns with others.

When someone self-harms encourage them to speak to a GP and other health and social services they are known to. Help them learn more about self-harm through resources and make them aware of potential support from family and friends.

Harm minimisation can be possible when an individual will continue to self-harm. It can reduce long-term damage through distraction techniques, self-care approaches, wound hygiene and awareness of the potential complications of self-harm.

Is it safeguarding?

- Consider the risk of abuse and neglect and raise a concern if appropriate
- Only share information with the person's agreement unless there is vital risk to them or others, public interest or where a best interest decision needs to be made
- Assess mental capacity and consider best interest and DoLS
- A person has a right to request a mental health assessment which could lead to informal admission to inpatient facilities
- If they are a risk to themselves or others, they may be sectioned under the Mental Health Act 1983 following assessment