

Stockport Self-Harm Information Guides

How does self-harm help? If it helps, why stop?

How does self-harm help?

It's important to acknowledge that self-harm helps you—otherwise you wouldn't do it. Some of the ways cutting and self-harming can help include:

- Expressing feelings you can't put into words
- Helping you feel in control
- Releasing the pain and tension you feel inside
- Relieving guilt and punishing yourself
- Distracting you from overwhelming emotions or difficult life circumstances
- Making you feel alive, or simply feel *something*, instead of feeling numb

If it helps, why stop?

Once you better understand why you self-harm, you can learn ways to stop self-harming, and find things that can support you through this struggle. Although self-harm and cutting can give you temporary relief, it comes at a cost. In the long term, it causes far more problems than it solves.

The relief is short lived, and is quickly followed by other feelings like shame and guilt. Meanwhile, it keeps you from learning more effective strategies for feeling better.

Keeping the secret from friends and family members is difficult and lonely.

You can hurt yourself badly, even if you don't mean to. It's easy to misjudge the depth of a cut or end up with an infected wound.

If you don't learn other ways to deal with emotional pain, it puts you at risk for bigger problems down the line, including major depression, drug and alcohol addiction, and suicide.

Self-harm can become addictive. It may start off as an impulse or something you do to feel more in control, but soon it feels like the cutting or self-harming is controlling you. It often turns into a compulsive behaviour that seems impossible to stop.

The bottom line: self-harm and cutting don't help you with the issues that made you want to hurt yourself in the first place.

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Working out why you self-harm

Learn to manage overwhelming stress and emotions

Understanding why you cut or self-harm is a vital first step toward your recovery.

If you can work out what function your self-injury serves, you can learn other ways to get those needs met—which in turn can reduce your desire to hurt yourself.

Identify your self-harm triggers

Remember, self-harm is most often a way of dealing with emotional pain.

What feelings make you want to cut or hurt yourself?

Sadness? Anger? Shame? Loneliness? Guilt? Emptiness?

Once you learn to recognise the feelings that trigger your need to self-injure, you can start developing healthier alternatives.

Get in touch with your feelings

If you're having a hard time pinpointing the feelings that trigger your urge to cut, you may need to work on being aware of your emotions. This means knowing what you are feeling and why.

It's the ability to identify and express what you are feeling from moment to moment and to understand the connection between your feelings and your actions.

The idea of paying attention to your feelings—rather than numbing them or releasing them through self-harm—may sound frightening to you.

You may be afraid that you'll get overwhelmed or be stuck with the pain. But the truth is that emotions quickly come and go if you let them.

If you don't try to fight, judge, or beat yourself up over the feeling, you'll find that it soon fades, replaced by another emotion. It's only when you obsess over the feeling that it persists.

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Finding New Coping Techniques

Self-harm is your way of dealing with feelings and difficult situations. So if you're going to stop, you need to have alternative ways of coping in place so you can respond differently when you start to feel like cutting or hurting yourself.

If you self-harm to express pain and intense emotions

- Paint, draw, or scribble on a big piece of paper with red ink or paint
- Express your feelings in a journal
- Compose a poem or song to say what you feel
- Write down any negative feelings and then rip the paper up
- Listen to music that expresses what you're feeling

If you self-harm to calm and soothe yourself

- Take a bath or hot shower
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Massage your neck, hands, and feet
- Listen to calming music

If you self-harm because you feel disconnected and numb

- Call a friend (you don't have to talk about self-harm)
- Take a cold shower
- Hold an ice cube in the crook of your arm or leg
- Chew something with a very strong taste, like chili peppers, peppermint, or a grapefruit peel
- Go online to a self-help website, chat room, or message board

If you self-harm to release tension or vent anger

- Exercise vigorously—run, dance, jump rope, or hit a punch bag
- Punch a cushion or mattress or scream into your pillow
- Squeeze a stress ball or squish Play-Doh or clay
- Rip something up (sheets of paper, a magazine)
- Make some noise (play an instrument, shout or play loud music)

Substitutes for the cutting sensation

- Use a red felt tip pen to mark where you might usually cut
- Rub ice across your skin where you might usually cut
- Put rubber bands on wrists, arms, or legs and snap them instead of cutting or hitting

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Alternatives to Self-Harm & Distraction Techniques

These are some ideas for helping people delay or avoid self-harm that you might wish to consider – *they've all been suggested by people who self-harm.*

Some ideas might seem ridiculous, but others might work.

Different people find that different things help, and it isn't a failure if you try something and it doesn't help. You will be able to add things which you have discovered.

Letting it out physically

Scream as loud as you can

Hit a cushion / punch bag / throw a cushion against a wall

Kick a football against a wall

Squeeze ice really hard

Squeeze a stress ball

Tear up a newspaper/phone directory

Play loud music and dance energetically – be as wild as you like

Draw on the place you want to cut with red pen, fake blood or watered down food colouring

Write words on yourself with a red marker pen

Spend some energy - go for a walk/swim/go to the gym/ride a bike/go running

Trying to work out how you're feeling...

Ask yourself "Do I feel angry?" "Do I feel anxious?" "What about...?"

Ask yourself 'What would the razor blade say if it could talk to me?'

Write a letter to someone you're angry with (hurt by etc.) saying how you feel (No need to send it)

Write a list of your achievements

Write a letter to yourself saying 'I love YOU because...'

Make a list of things you're thankful for

Make a wish list

Talking about it....

Talk to a friend or relative

Call Child-line, the Samaritans or other helpline

Allow yourself to cry (if you can)

Distraction yourself

Watch television / a DVD etc

Play on a computer

Learn a new skill

Do puzzles / play chess / make your own puzzles / Origami / make jewellery

Look through photos

Design a dream house

Have a debate

Build a card house

Make a paper chain of the days it's been since you last self-harmed (add a new one every day)

Find out how to put 8 queens on a chessboard without any of them being able to kill each other
(There are 92 possible ways to do this)

Reasoning with yourself

When you're not feeling like self-harming, write a list of reasons to avoid self-harm.

The list will be different for each person - it's whatever makes sense to you.

Look at the list when you feel like harming yourself. It could include things like:

"I've managed for two weeks without harming. I don't want to start again"

"Once I start it's difficult to stop"

"I'll regret the damage afterwards"

"It doesn't help in the long run. I can harm now but I'll need to do it again in a couple of days"

"If I can hang on, the need to self-harm sometimes passes"

"Self-harm affects my relationships"

Making yourself safe

Try to identify things that prompt you to self-harm. If possible avoid them or prepare for them

Avoid shops that sell things you might use to harm yourself

Stay with a friend

Delaying self-harm

Keep things you harm yourself with in a locked cupboard or in a box with tape around it. It gives you time to think between wanting to self-harm and doing it

Phone Child-line or the Samaritans – arrange to ring again in an hour/ two hours and promise yourself you will not harm before then

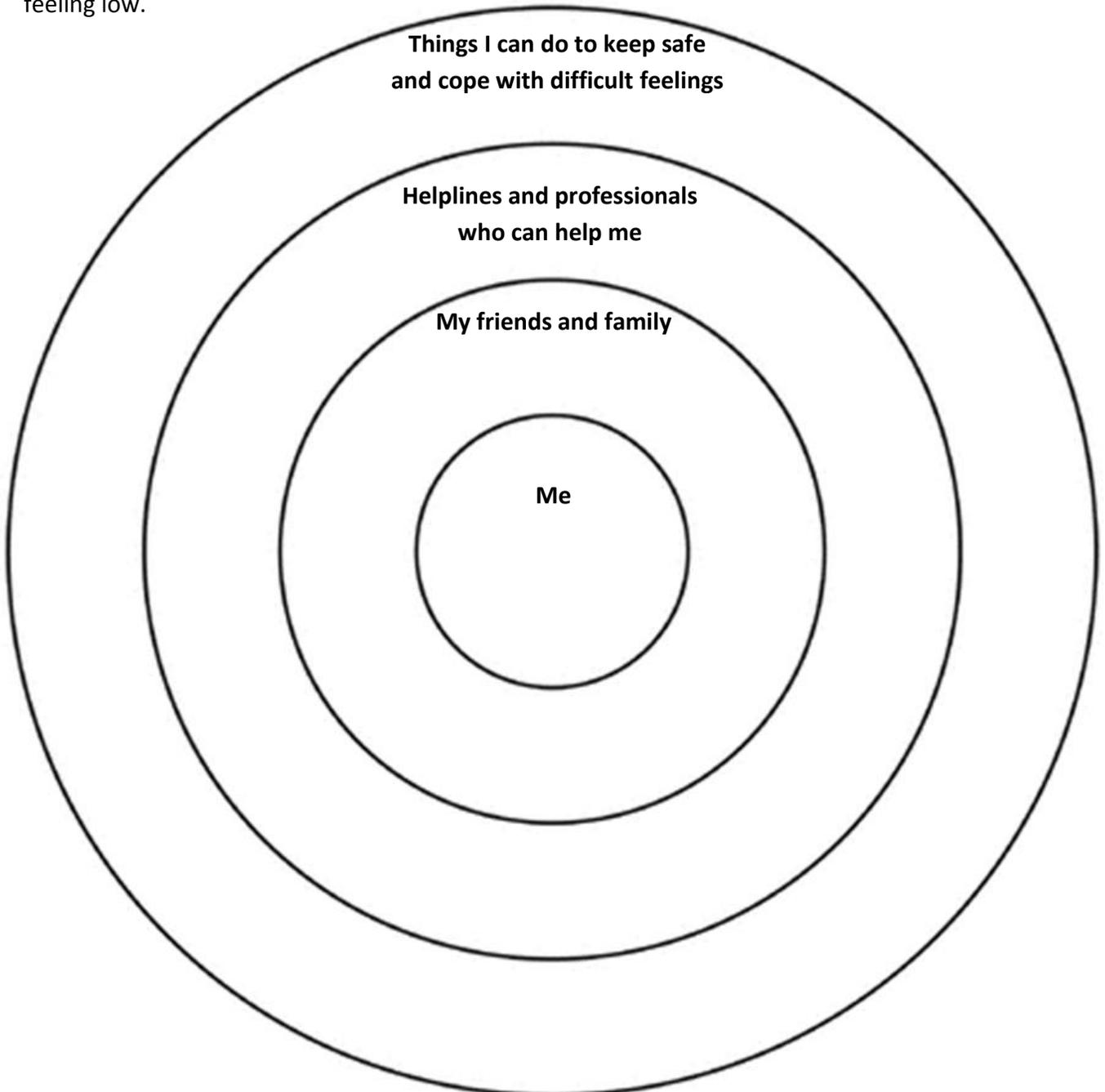
Use any of the suggestions for avoiding self-harm to try and delay it for a while

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Creating a Safety Net

Everybody needs a 'safety net' – made up of the people in our lives who can help or support us and the things in our lives that can help us cope with difficult feelings and help keep us safe.

Try to identify some people in each of the groups below that you would feel most comfortable talking to and write down anything you have found helps to stay safe and cope when you're feeling low.



Keep your completed safety net with you—and refer to it when you feel low or need help to avoid self-harming.

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Information for Friends

- If one of your friends is self-harming you may feel angry, shocked, guilty and upset. These reactions are normal, but what your friend really needs is support from you. You can help just by being there, listening and giving support.
- Be open and honest: if you are worried about a friend's safety, you should tell a responsible adult you can trust. Let your friend know that you're going to do this—and explain that you are doing it because you care for him or her.
- Encourage your friend to get help. You can go with your friend or perhaps tell a grown-up on behalf of your friend.
- Get information from websites, help-lines or a library, etc. This can help you understand what your friend is experiencing.
- Your friendship might change because of this problem. You might feel bad that you can't help your friend enough—or feel guilty if you have had to tell someone about it. These feelings are normal and don't mean that you have done something wrong or haven't done enough.
- Your friend may get angry with you or tell you that you don't understand. It is important not to take this personally: often, when people are feeling bad about themselves, they get angry with the people they are closest to.
- It can be really hard to look after someone who is self-harming. That makes it really important that you have an adult you can talk to who can look after you. You may not always be able to be there for your friend—and that's ok. You need to take care of yourself and keep yourself safe.
- Approximately 1 in 12 young people self-harm at some point—so in a class of 30, you'd expect at least 2 young people to self-harm at some time.
- Self-harm can be any behaviour where the person is deliberately trying to hurt themselves—this includes cutting, swallowing things, taking an overdose, pulling out hair, burning or hitting themselves.
- Self-harm is different from being suicidal. Some people who self-harm want to kill themselves. However, people can also self-harm as a way of reducing tension, expressing hostility, making someone feel guilty, trying to feel in control—or for many other reasons. It is not just attention seeking behaviour. Self-harming behaviour may express a strong sense of despair and needs to be taken seriously.

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Information for Parents and Carers

As a parent/carer, you may feel angry, shocked, guilty and upset. These reactions are normal, but what the person you care about really needs is support from you. He or she needs you to stay calm and to listen to them, to cope with very difficult feelings that build up and cannot be expressed. The person needs to find a less harmful way of coping.

- *What is self-harm?*

Self-harm is any behaviour such as self-cutting, swallowing objects, taking an overdose, hanging or running in front of a car, risk taking behaviour e.g. alcohol intoxication where the intent is to deliberately cause harm to self.

- *How common is self-harm?*

Over the past 40 years, there has been a large increase in the number of young people who harm themselves. A large community study found that among 15- to 16-year-olds, approximately 1 in 5 had self-harmed in the previous year.

- *Is it just attention-seeking?*

Some people who self-harm have a desire to kill themselves. However, there are many other factors that lead people to self-harm, including a desire to escape, to reduce tension, to express hostility, to make someone feel guilty or to increase caring from others. Even if the young person does not intend to commit suicide, self-harming behaviour may express a strong sense of despair and needs to be taken seriously. It is not just attention seeking behaviour.

- *Why do young people harm themselves?*

All sorts of upsetting events can trigger self-harm, such as arguments with family, break-up of a relationship, failure in exams and bullying at school. Sometimes several stresses occur over a short period of time and one more incident is the final straw. Young people who have emotional or behavioural problems or low self-esteem can be particularly at risk from self-harm. Suffering a bereavement or serious rejection can also increase the risk. Sometimes, young people try to escape their problems by taking drugs or alcohol. This only makes the situation worse. For some people, self-harm is a desperate attempt to show others that something is wrong in their lives.

- *What you can do to help*

- ❖ Keep an open mind
- ❖ Make the time to listen
- ❖ Help the person find different ways of coping
- ❖ Go with the person to get the right kind of help as quickly as possible

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Self-harm: the facts

Fact: People self-harm in different ways.

Some cut their arms or legs, others bang or bruise their bodies. Self-harm also includes burning, scratching, hair-pulling, or anything that causes injury to the body. Some people take tablets, perhaps not a big overdose, but enough to blot things out for a while. Some people hurt themselves just once or twice. Other people use self-harm to cope over a long time. They might hurt themselves quite often during a bad patch.

Fact: Self-harm isn't necessarily about suicide.

Sometimes people harm themselves because they want to die. But often it's more about staying alive. People may hurt themselves to help them get through a bad time. It's a coping mechanism.

Fact: It's not 'just attention-seeking'.

People self-harm because they are in pain and trying to cope. They could also be trying to show that something is wrong. They need to be taken seriously.

Fact: Self-harm isn't always a sign of mental illness or of something being 'wrong' with a person.

All sorts of people self-harm. Even people in high-powered jobs. It's a sign that something is bothering and upsetting someone, not that they are mad. You may not have met anyone else who self-harms and may find it upsetting or shocking. There's a lot of secrecy about self-harm, but many thousands of people cope in this way for a while. Approximately 1 in 12 young people self-harm at some point.

Fact: Other things can be 'self-harm' too. Things like starving, overeating, drinking too much, risk-taking, smoking and many others are also types of 'self-harm'. Some coping methods (like burying yourself in work) may be more socially acceptable, but can still be harmful.

Fact: People do stop self-harming.

Many people stop self-harming - when they're ready. They sort their problems out and find other ways of dealing with their feelings. It might take a long time and they might need help. But things can get better.

Fact: People self-harm for a reason.

Self-harm is often a way of coping with painful experiences and trying to gain a sense of control over difficult circumstances. These might include being abused or neglected, losing someone important, being bullied, harassed or assaulted, or being very lonely and isolated.