



# Understanding Self-Harm

How can I support someone else

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**Self-injury and self-harm are both coping mechanisms used by an individual to deal with difficult feelings, emotional pain and situations that can feel overwhelming.**

### **What is self-injury?**

-Self-injury is where an individual purposely hurts themselves in a physical way. Cutting is most widely known, however self-injury can take many forms including, but not limited to, burning the skin, scratching, pulling hair, and inserting objects into the body.

### **What is self-harm?**

-Self-harm behaviours can be less obvious than self-injury, however these can impact a person both in the present and later on in life. Self-harm can include acts such as excessive exercise, over or under eating, drinking and drug abuse.

Although there are two terms, injury and harm, we will use self-harm as the term throughout our information.

### **Why someone might self-harm?**

There are lots of reasons why someone might self-harm, but for many it is linked with dealing with something they have experienced in the past or are going through right now.

Some people have described their self-harm as a way to give some relief from the anxiety and distress they are feeling. It can be something that provides a distraction from the emotional pain, or to feel a sense of control over their body or current situation and can be used by some to express internal feelings in an external way.

Difficult experiences can cause someone to start self-harming, these can include coping with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety, as a result of physical or sexual abuse, bullying, relationships ending, illness, money worries and general pressures in life at school, college or in the workplace.

### **How can I help someone who is self-harming?**

It takes a lot of strength to support someone who self-harms. It is important to have enough resources available for you to feel you can continue supporting the person, but also that you look after yourself and recognise what your needs are as the supporter.

The person harming themselves is doing this as a reaction to the distress they are feeling, and using it as a coping mechanism. When supporting someone, it is important to not focus just on the self-harm, but on the reasons behind it. Helping someone to identify the triggers for their self-harm is the starting point.

Many people who self-harm can feel very ashamed and lonely. Being supportive of their whole journey, including setbacks, in an open and non-judgemental way will really support their recovery.

### **Signs to look out for:**

Although there can be some common signs that someone might be self-harming, everyone is different, but if you notice a big change in behaviour including impulsive actions and self-destructive behaviours, these could be an indicator.

Other things to look out for include, wearing long sleeves, particularly in warm weather, withdrawing from others, blood on bedding or clothing, increasing amounts of cuts or bruises, using lots of disposable razors or unexplained increase in sharp objects appearing and changes in eating habits.

### **Here are some examples of open and encouraging statements and questions you can use while talking to someone about self-harm:**

‘I know that you are going through a difficult time right now, I want you to know that I am here for you and you are not alone’

‘I can only imagine how difficult this situation is for you and I appreciate that you feel you can talk to me’

‘Would you like to share what’s on your mind with me?’

‘This must be very challenging for you, what can I do to support you?’

### **How to help someone look after their self-harm wounds:**

When someone harms themselves, it is important to look after the wounds to prevent infection.

If someone comes to you with self-harming injuries, first control the bleeding by applying pressure to the wound with a clean tissue. This should stop or slow the bleeding right down, however if the wound is bleeding intensely after a few minutes, visit A&E for medical care.

Once you have minimalised the bleeding, you need to clean the cut with water or an antiseptic wipe then cover with a plaster to stop any dirt getting into the wound. Make sure to change the plaster every day.

Look out for signs that a wound has become infected, these can include swelling, redness and increased pain in the affected area, pus forming from the wound, a high temperature or generally feeling unwell. If any of these symptoms are being experienced, seek medical help as soon as possible.

### **How to help someone wear their self-harm scars in public:**

It is a personal choice whether to show scars in public, however it can be extremely daunting for someone to start the process of exposing them.

It's important to remind them to ease into it in any way that makes them feel comfortable. This can include them wearing short sleeves but covering scars with accessories, showing a trusted friend or other family members first before going out in public, or wearing short sleeves around the house first before wearing them outside.

### **Reminders for someone struggling with their scars:**

Scars are not something to be ashamed of, if someone isn't ready to show them in public, that is completely fine, but if they are ready to try, it is good to remind them that doing this shows how far they have come.

Scars are a part of who they are, and the important thing to work on is how they feel in their own skin, and learning to accept the scars.



### **What not to say to someone with scars:**

Having questions to someone who self-harms is natural when you want to understand their reasons for doing so, however making negative comments such as saying they have ruined their body or telling them how they should or shouldn't show their scars can have a negative impact on their wellbeing if they feel they are being judged rather than supported.

### **Relapse:**

It is common for people who self-harm to relapse, even when they are really trying to reduce or stop this behaviour altogether. When relapse happens it is important to be empathetic and listen to their struggles, be encouraging and reassuring. Don't make them feel guilty or invalidate their progress as recovery is something that takes a lot of time.

### **Does someone need urgent help?**

If someone has self-harmed and is in need of urgent immediate medical attention, please ring 999.

If they don't need medical attention but are experiencing crisis and need urgent mental health support, please ring 111 or visit [www.111.nhs.uk](http://www.111.nhs.uk).

For all other support, including reaching out to local services, please visit the urgent help section of our website [www.solentmind.org.uk/urgent-help](http://www.solentmind.org.uk/urgent-help)

### **Resources:**

We understand that talking about self-harm can be difficult, so have created some resources to help you begin that conversation. Have a look through our resource section to download useful tools such as our conversation road map and start the conversation card.