

SELF HARM AND YOUNG PEOPLE

*An information booklet for
parents & concerned adults*

#littlethings



NATIONAL OFFICE *for*
SUICIDE PREVENTION



Connecting for Life

HE Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

SELF HARM

This booklet explores the topic of self-harm and provides an overview of what you as a parent or concerned adult can do to support a young person who may be self-harming or having thoughts of suicide.

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WHAT IS SELF-HARM?¹

Self-harm is when someone inflicts physical harm on themselves, often without anyone else knowing. Self-harm is a behaviour that is often the expression of the person's emotional distress.

Some examples are cutting, burning, biting or hitting, pulling out hair or scratching and picking at sores on skin. Self-harm also includes forms of behaviour with some level of suicide intent such as overdoses.

Self-harm is not necessarily a suicide attempt and engaging in self-harm may not mean that someone wants to die.

Most commonly, self-harm is a way of coping with difficult or painful feelings.

However, people who self-harm are statistically at a greater risk of going on to take their own lives. If the emotional problems associated with self-harm escalate, and are not dealt with, they can sometimes lead to suicide.

[1 Adapted from HSE 2007, Understanding Self Harm](#)

WHY WOULD SOMEONE HARM THEMSELVES?

Self-harm may be used as a way to cope with stressful, upsetting or difficult experiences and the strong feelings associated with them.

SELF-HARM MAY:

- Provide a way to express difficult or hidden feelings. Overwhelming feelings can sometimes leave young people feeling numb or empty. Engaging in self-harm may provide a temporary sense of feeling again or be a way to express anger, sadness, grief or hurt.
- Be a way of punishing themselves, or of cutting out their “badness”.
- Be a way of communicating a need for support when they feel unable to use words or any other way to do so.
- Be a way of proving to themselves that they are not invisible.
- Be a way of making themselves feel alive.
- Provide a feeling of control. They might feel that self-harm is one way they can have a sense of control over their life, feelings, or body, especially if they feel as if other things in their life are out of control.
- Provide the person with a means to comfort themselves.

Self-harm is sometimes an indicator of more serious mental health problems. If you think your child or the young person you’re concerned about is experiencing an underlying mental health problem you should bring them to their GP for a consultation.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

If you learn that a young person is self-harming:

- Don't panic.
- Deal with any immediate medical concerns.
- Listen and find out what they need.
- Acknowledge their pain without being intrusive.
- Try to understand the severity of their distress; self-harm is often an expression of intense inner turmoil.
- Provide a safe and open environment in which they can freely discuss their thoughts and feelings.
- Talk about the self-harm; pretending it doesn't exist will not make it go away and not talking about it often reinforces the shame and secrecy associated with it.
- If they don't want to talk straight away, let them know you are there to talk whenever they want.
- Let them know how you feel; many young people who self-harm have trouble expressing their thoughts and feelings, so don't withhold yours.
- See the person, not the injuries; self-harm is a symptom of deeper underlying issues.
- Encourage them to cry - crying is a healthy and normal way to express sadness or frustrations.
- Tell them that when they get urges to self-harm to try to put off harming themselves. They can try to distract themselves until they feel the anxiety and the urge to self-harm have passed by:

- * *Talking to someone; either face-to-face, by calling a helpline or going online.*
 - * *Doing exercise.*
 - * *Playing a game – a board game or online.*
 - * *Shouting or singing at the top of their lungs, on their own or to music – they can do this into a pillow if they don't want other people to hear.*
 - * *See www.nshn.co.uk for a list of over 100 distraction techniques.*
- Suggest keeping a journal, as it can help to relieve stress and tension by writing about feelings they might not be able to talk about.
 - Offer to help with relaxation activities such as yoga, meditation and breathing exercises, which are often helpful in reducing anxiety.
 - Talk to a professional, such as a GP, to get further information and advice about self-harm.
 - Encourage them to see a mental health professional to get support. They will need to understand why they self-harm and learn new ways to cope, if they are to stop the behaviour. Talking therapy is likely to be an essential part of the help that is needed. Talk to the young person about what kind of support they would consider, and help by bringing them to appointments. You may also be asked to take part in the therapy process.
 - Be realistic. Don't expect the behaviour to stop immediately. It may take a long time to replace the self-harm with a healthier coping strategy. Talking with you may be the first step.
 - Devise an emergency care plan together, in case the person injures themselves more severely than intended.
 - Don't forget to look after yourself and your own mental health, by getting support from trusted family and friends. It can be emotionally draining to support someone who self-harms. By helping yourself you are also improving things for them too. You can also talk to your own GP to get help with your own feelings and reactions.

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WHAT IS UNHELPFUL?

Telling someone not to self-harm is both ineffective and condescending.

- Most young people who self-harm would stop if they could (it can be a coping mechanism they use to stay alive) and even casual comments encouraging your son, daughter or the young person you're concerned about to stop should be avoided because they run the risk of damaging your relationship and forming a barrier to effective communication.
- Making assumptions that your son, daughter or the young person you're concerned about wants to talk about the self-harm, that they are doing it to seek attention or that they actually want to die.
- Making them feel responsible.
- Making them feel guilty.
- Punishing them.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Statutory services and health professionals

General Practitioner (GP)

A GP is a doctor trained to deal with general physical and mental health issues that a person of any age might have.

VISIT:

www.icgp.ie to find a list of GPs working in Ireland.

Health Service Executive (HSE) Community Psychology Services

HSE Community Psychology Services provide a wide range of assessment and therapeutic services for children and adolescents up to 18-years-old, and their families. They can be contacted through your local HSE Health Office and referrals are accepted from parents, teachers, GPs and other health service providers.

VISIT:

www.hse.ie/eng/services/Find_a_Service/LHO/ for local health office contact details.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

CAMHS is a free specialist service operated by the HSE for children and adolescents with serious emotional, behavioural or mental health problems. The service caters for young people up to 16-years-old, although some CAMHS services extend to 18-years-old. A young person must be referred to CAMHS by a health professional who is familiar with the case. This will usually be the family GP. CAMHS also accept referrals from other senior health professionals such as public health nurses, social workers, speech and language therapists or educational psychologists.

Health Service Executive (HSE) National Counselling Service

The HSE National Counselling Service provides free counselling and psychotherapy for survivors of childhood abuse.

CALL:

[1800 235234](tel:1800235234) (Monday - Friday, 9am - 5pm) or their helpline [1800 477477](tel:1800477477) (Wednesday - Sunday, 6pm - 10pm)

VISIT:

www.hse-ncs.ie

Counsellors

Counselling is the process of discussing issues and feelings with a professional to work through emotional distress.

VISIT:

www.counsellingdirectory.ie,
www.irish-counselling.ie or
www.psychotherapy-ireland.com
for a list of accredited counsellors and psychotherapists working in Ireland or ask your GP for a recommendation.

In an emergency:

Emergency services can be contacted at any time of the day or night by calling [999](tel:999) or [112](tel:112). You can also go straight to the Accident and Emergency department of your nearest general hospital if you need immediate medical assistance.

Support websites

Aware

Aware works to create a society where people who experience depression and related mood disorders, and their families, are understood and supported.

www.aware.ie

BelongTo

This supports parents who have just been told by their son or daughter that they are Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual or Transgender (LGBT).

www.belongto.org

Bodywhys

Bodywhys is a national voluntary organisation supporting people affected by eating disorders.

www.bodywhys.ie

Childline

This is part of the Irish Society for the prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC). Childline try to empower, support and protect young people.

Tel: 1800-666-666 24 hours a day

Text: 'Talk' to 50101 (2.00pm – 10.00pm) every day.

www.childline.ie

Console

Console is a national organisation supporting people in suicidal crisis and those bereaved by suicide through professional counselling support and helpline.

Tel: 1800-247-247

www.console.ie

Distraction List

National Self-harm Network (UK) which contains distractions that can help young people experiencing urges to self-harm.

www.nshn.co.uk/download/distractions.pdf

Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a network of projects across Ireland working with communities to better support young peoples mental health and well being.

www.jigsaw.ie

Parentline

This service supports and gives guidance and information on all aspects of being a parent.

www.parentline.ie

Pieta House

Pieta provides a specialised treatment programme for people who have suicidal ideation or who participate in self-harming behaviours.

www.pieta.ie

ReachOut.com

ReachOut.com is Ireland's online youth mental health service and is dedicated to taking the mystery out of mental health by providing quality assured mental health information.

www.reachout.com

Samaritans

The Samaritans provide befriending 24 hours a day to those who are dealing with personal crisis, whatever you've done, whatever life's done to you, no pressure, no judgement, they are there for you any time.

www.samaritans.org

SpunOut

SpunOut is a youth led national charity working to empower young people between the ages of 16-25 to create personal and social change.

www.spunout.ie

YourMentalHealth.ie

A website developed by the HSE, National Office for Suicide Prevention which highlights some of the things we can do to look after our mental health.

www.yourmentalhealth.ie

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Resource information

This handbook is designed to provide basic knowledge and awareness of the facts and issues behind self-harm in children and young people, with advice about ways staff in children's services can respond.

This information booklet for parents and concerned adults was produced by ReachOut.com and funded by the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention.

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Notes

SELF HARM AND YOUNG PEOPLE

National Office for Suicide Prevention

Mental Health Division, Health Service Executive,
Stewart's Hospital, Palmerstown, Dublin 20.

Phone: +353 (0)1 620 1670.

www.nosp.ie

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