

A line art illustration in a dark blue color. At the top is a cloud. Below it is a lightning bolt striking down. In the foreground, there is a simple outline of a person standing with their arms slightly away from their body. The text 'SELF-HARM' is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font across the center of the image.

SELF-HARM



What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm is when someone voluntarily and deliberately damages or injures their body.

Why do people Self-Harm?

Although people who self-harm may experience suicidal thoughts, self-harming in itself does not necessarily mean the person was intending to commit suicide.

Self-harm is an individual experience so the reason one person harms themselves may be different to the reason another person does this. Some people self-harm as a way of punishing themselves because they see themselves as a failure or a bad person, others do this because they're suffering with overwhelming anxiety, stress, or tension, and find that this offers a 'release' of their feelings or frustrations. Some people even do this because they feel completely numb and use the pain as a way of feeling alive.

How do people Self-Harm?

People self-harm in many different ways. The method most people have heard of is 'cutting'. Cutting is when a person uses a sharp object such as a knife or razor to make cuts on their body. Others may scratch themselves with their fingernails or other sharp objects. Some people will hit themselves with fists or objects. Some people will pull out clumps of hair, and others may even eat things they know will make them sick. Some people will burn themselves with cigarettes or other hot objects. Some people may do many of these things – or they may do something not mentioned here. There really is no one single way in which people self-harm.

How do I know if someone is self-harming?

You might not. Many people who self-harm feel a sense of shame or embarrassment because of their behaviour and, as such, they will try and hide this from others. A person who is cutting or burning themselves, for instance, might start doing this on a part of the body which is not visible – or simply cover their injuries with clothing. A person who is pulling their hair out might wear a hat to cover any bald patches. If you notice that someone has unexplained cuts, bruises, scratches or burns, they might be self-harming, but they might not be. If you're concerned that someone you know may be self-harming, you can talk to them about it – but do this in an empathetic and non-judgemental way.

What do I do if I discover someone is self-harming?

First, remain calm. Be supportive, empathetic, and non-judgemental. If you make someone feel bad about self-harming you may actually make things worse for them. Reassure them that you will support them any way you can, but suggest they speak to a healthcare professional such as their GP to get support. You can also suggest they seek counselling – but don't pressure them into doing this against their will. You could also suggest they call a helpline such as the Samaritans.

If someone tells you they are self-harming, you can do all these same things but don't disclose this information to anyone else as it will really damage the sense of trust between you and, again, may make things more difficult for the person. Only share this information if you have been told you can and, even then, only with someone whom you have been told it is ok to do so.

I'm self-harming, what can I do?

We understand that this is a very difficult thing you are going through and that asking for help can be daunting. Our suggestion would be that you speak to a medical professional, such as your doctor (GP), who can then provide information on where you can seek further help. Talking therapies, such as counselling and CBT can be very effective, so it could be useful to consider those. If you're not ready to seek therapy, consider telling a trusted friend or family member who can support you. Talking about your feelings can be very useful and often helps you process the stresses you are under. If you don't feel comfortable telling anyone you know, you can contact a confidential helpline for emotional support.

Below are some useful numbers you can call, although a search on the internet may help you find additional support in your area:

Samaritans: 116 123 (this is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year) Sane Line: 0300 304 7000 (opening hours vary)

The Mix: 0808 808 4994 (for ages 13 - 25, opening hours vary)

CALM: 0800 58 58 58 (a service aimed at males only, opening hours vary)

I've injured myself, what should I do?

If the wound is superficial: clean it and use a plaster or bandage to protect it from infection and seek medical advice.

If the wound is serious but is a non life-threatening injury, contact the NHS helpline on 111 – or ask someone to do this on your behalf if you are unable to do this yourself. They will ask some questions and advise what to do next.

If the wound is serious and is life threatening, then contact the emergency services on 999 – or ask someone to do this on your behalf if you are unable to do this yourself.

Further Reading

You may find our guides on distraction and grounding techniques and mindfulness and meditation useful.