

A STAFF GUIDE TO Understanding and Working with Self-Harm

Self-harm is when someone intentionally hurts their own body, typically as a way of coping with overwhelming emotions. It can be a sign of distress and should be approached with sensitivity, kindness, and non-judgment. Staff working with individuals who self-harm play an important role in providing support, ensuring safety, and encouraging healthier ways for people to cope.

What can self-harm look like?

- Cutting or scratching the skin
- Burning oneself
- Hitting or punching oneself
- Hair-pulling
- Banging head or limbs against hard surfaces

What self-harm is not

To many people, self-harm might look like a suicide-attempt. This is not the case (although they are sometimes linked). It's usually a way for people who are struggling to temporarily relieve their emotional pain. Self-harm is not "bad" or "naughty"; the person acting this way is not trying to be difficult or hurtful.

You don't have to cope with this alone

If someone you work with is self-harming or you suspect they might be, it can feel overwhelming and scary. There are many people you can talk to about this. Try to seek support, so you can help the person as much as possible but also so you protect yourself. You could speak with a colleague, manager, or local safeguarding lead.

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Signs that Someone is Self-Harming

Self-harm can be difficult to spot sometimes, especially as people often try to hide it. If you know some of the signs that someone is self-harming, it's easier to notice it earlier and get them the help they need.

- **Physical signs:** Unexplained cuts, burns, bruises, hair loss, scars on areas like the arms, legs, or torso
- **Behavioral signs:** Wearing long sleeves or pants in warm weather to cover injuries, reluctance to participate in physical activities, sudden mood changes, withdrawing from social activities, not speaking to others, misusing alcohol or drugs.
- **Emotional signs:** Increased irritability, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, difficulty managing emotions.

It's important to note that some individuals may self-harm in private and may not share their behavior unless they feel safe to do so.

By making individuals feel they can share and will not be told off for self-harming, they are more likely to open up about their struggles.

How to Respond: Dos and Don'ts

If someone discloses that they are self-harming, please be mindful in how you respond to them.

DO:

- **Listen Without Judgment**
- **Ask Open-Ended Questions** (example: “can you tell me more about what’s been going on for you lately?”)
- **Offer Support** (example: “I’m sorry you’re feeling this way, but I want you to know I’m here to help you.”)
- **Encourage Professional Help** (such as helplines, professional counselling)
- **Respect Boundaries** (some people might not be ready to talk about their self-harming; if this is the case then give them space, and let them know they can reach out anytime)

DON'T:

- **Don't react with shock or anger** (don't say it's bad, naughty or ridiculous – this can make them feel more ashamed and misunderstood)
- **Don't try to “fix” the situation immediately** (it might take time and professional help for the individual to move away from self-harm behaviours)
- **Don't minimise their feelings** (saying things like “other people have it worse” can be very harmful and invalidate their experience)
- **Avoid making promises you can't keep** (don't promise to keep it a secret if their safety is at risk; know when to get other professionals involved)

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Healthier Ways for People to Cope

There are healthier ways to deal with self-harm. By giving individuals information about ways they can deal with their overwhelming feelings, they will have more tools and be more able to do this.

Here are some things people can try when they have the urge to self-harm

- **Pause and Breathe:** Take slow, deep breaths. Inhale for four counts, hold for four, and exhale for four. Repeat until you feel calmer. If you make your exhale longer than your inhale this can calm the nervous system.
- **Change the temperature:** Hold an ice cube in your hand or press it against your skin; this can help distract and soothe. Putting your face in a sink of cold water or having a cold shower and holding your breath can trigger a diver's response which has a calming effect on the body.
- **Journaling:** Write down your feelings. You can scribble or make it as messy as you want. Expressing your emotions on paper can give you a sense of release and control.
- **Physical Activity:** Go for a walk, do as many push ups as you can, dance, or stretch. Moving your body helps release tension and boosts mood.
- **Grounding Techniques:** Focus on your surroundings. Try the "5-4-3-2-1" technique: Name 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste.

How to Help People Get the Support They Need

It is useful to know some places where people who are self-harming can go to for support. You can give this information out to signpost people for additional support.

Support might look like...

- A trusted adult, such as a friend or family member
- Trusted professionals such as teachers, support workers, and mental health practitioners
- The GP can be a gateway to getting additional support for self-harm
- Crisis text line for self-harm (text SHOUT to 85258)
- Hotlines such as Samaritans (116 123)
- Mental Health charities like Mind UK

Remember:

- It might take time for people to overcome their self-harming behaviours
- Speak to another trusted professional if you have safety concerns
- Treat each individual with kindness, compassion, and understanding
- Self-harming doesn't mean a person is suicidal
- Don't make the person self-harming feel bad or ashamed of what they're doing

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