

# Self Harm

a self help guide

Shining a light on the future





## Introduction

**This booklet is for people who deliberately harm themselves and are unhappy about it. It is also for family and friends who may have difficulty understanding this behaviour.**

**People who have experience of harming themselves have contributed to the writing of this booklet.**

**It offers self help advice. However, anyone who self-harms should also see their family doctor.**

“I need to feel something, to know that I exist. Burning myself allows me to be in control of my body. It sometimes seems as though it is the only way I can feel alive or in control of anything... it is something I carefully plan when things get bad...”

“Tension builds inside me and I get to the point when I feel I will explode. When I cut myself it all disappears, it seems like the badness goes out of me, my anger dissolves... for a while...”

“I hurt myself when I want to hurt others... it is better to hurt myself than them”

“It’s a downward spiral... small cuts lead to bigger cuts”

These are the thoughts of people who have self-harmed. You may have had similar experiences yourself or you may have a friend or family member who self-harms. Although people rarely talk about self-harm, it is relatively common, little understood and very distressing.

This booklet aims to help you to begin to:

- **Understand self-harm**, what can cause it and keep it going.
- **Explore ways of** controlling self-harm.
- Discover other ways of **getting help**.

## Understanding self-harm

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

Many people harm themselves in some way, by smoking, drinking, working too hard or exercising too much. But for some people this self-harm is more apparent and can be quite severe.

Self-harm is sometimes known as self-injury and is where someone harms their body without wanting to die. Many people who harm themselves also have suicidal thoughts. But most feel that there is a difference between suicidal acts and acts of self-harm. They may say “I didn’t want to die, I just needed to get rid of terrible feelings”.

Some people may harm themselves many times each day. It may involve a lot of ritual. Some people may feel addicted to the self-harm behaviour. Others may only harm themselves occasionally when under emotional stress.

### **Who self-harms?**

People who self-harm may feel distressed a lot of the time. They may be irritable and very sensitive to rejection.

Self-harm is not determined by a person’s race, education, sexual preference or social group. Research has suggested that more women than men harm themselves (men may show their feelings in other ways). It tends to begin in adolescence and may decrease or disappear in the thirties. Some people who harm themselves have been sexually, emotionally or physically abused in their early life.

### **Why do people self-harm?**

People often feel unable to explain their reasons for harming themselves. Research has allowed us to begin to understand what may be happening. You may recognise some of the following reasons. Tick any that apply to you.

#### **To manage moods or feelings**

- To escape from emptiness, depression, shame or unreality.
- To relieve pent up tensions, pressure or anger.
- To feel something – to know you still exist.
- To feel in control.
- To get a buzz.
- To express or stop sexual feelings.
- To maintain the fear, anxiety or other intense feelings you may have become used to if you have been abused.

#### **To fit in with beliefs or thoughts**

- To punish yourself because you feel you are ‘bad’.
- To maintain negative belief “I’m flawed, worthless, weird”.
- To escape from feelings of guilt.

## **To communicate**

- To let people know how bad things are.
- To make your body show your pain.
- To express anger towards others and yourself, but on your own body.
- To obtain and maintain a response from others that you feel you wouldn't otherwise get.
- To punish others via your own body.
- To get people to listen to you.

Many people who self-harm regard their behaviour as a way of surviving. It may be a means of coping with unbearable emotional pain. Their reasons for self-harm tend to be complex and may include many of those listed above. Sadly some people do kill themselves whilst self-harming. This is most common in those who take overdoses of tablets or medicines.

**Misusing medicines or tablets can be very dangerous. Even small 'overdoses' can kill.**

## **In what ways do people self-harm?**

People who self-harm may cut or burn themselves. They may pull out their hair, punch themselves, bite themselves, poison themselves, pluck at or scratch their skin. They may generally put themselves at risk. There are endless different ways of self-harming. It may be dramatic, hidden, or ritualistic. It may be permanently mutilating, and may seriously disfigure their body before they are able to gain control of it.

## **How do other people react?**

Carers, friends, relatives or workers may react to self-harm in various ways. Some responses may be helpful, others less so. Typical reactions include:

### **Feelings of others:**

- Fear
- Panic
- Guilt
- Confusion
- Feeling criticised
- Anger
- Worry
- Helplessness
- Concern
- Feeling attacked
- Disgust
- Distress
- Detachment/ coldness/dislike
- Not caring
- Feeling useless

### **Actions of others:**

- Setting rules and restrictions
- Punishing
- Withdrawing
- Not talking about it
- Feeling criticised
- Challenging you to self-harm “go ahead then, cut yourself”
- Stepping up observation
- Being extra sensitive
- Talking about it
- Looking for experts
- Being over intrusive
- Taking people to hospital
- Offering more support
- Talking too much about it
- Stepping in to “solve” the problem
- Threatening to withdraw or leave

Later on we will offer advice on how friends, family and workers can offer a more helpful response.

### **Why do people want to stop self-harming?**

Many people who self harm want to stop. These are some of the reasons that they give.

- “It hurts sometimes”.
- “When my wounds become infected they are really painful”.
- “Trying to escape things by giving yourself scars only reminds you of the things you are trying to escape”.
- “Every time you see where you self harmed it reminds you of when you did it and makes you down again”.
- “People treat you funny if you have the scars”.
- “It upsets the people you are close to ...”.
- “I can’t wear short sleeved t-shirts in the summer”.
- “I can’t go on holiday to hot countries...”
- “I’m thinking about the future and what my children would think of the scars ...”

If you self-harm you may have your own reasons to stop. You may find it helpful to write them down.

## How can I control my self harm?

Ask yourself the following questions.

- **Do I need to change my life circumstances?**

If you are living in a situation that is emotionally or physically unsafe it will be difficult for you to stop self-harming. If you are in a violent or abusive atmosphere ask yourself why you are staying. Try to plan how you might change your situation. It may help to talk this over with someone else such as a friend, your GP or a counsellor.

- **What leads me to self-harm?**

Keep a diary of your self-harm to help you understand it better. It may look something like this.

Day	What was happening?	What I thought	How I felt	What I did
Monday	John 'put me down' again when we were out with his mates.	"I'm just rubbish"	Empty, gutted, afraid	Waited until we got home then 'cut' myself in the bathroom

People often find there is a clear pattern of events that leads them to harm themselves. If you know this you can begin to try and change. Think back to the last time you self-harmed and fill in the diary below.

Day	What was happening?	What I thought	How I felt	What I did

Try and keep a regular diary like this. This can be difficult and painful – it may be hard to capture your thoughts. But once you have discovered the pattern to your self-harm you can begin to try out methods to alter that pattern. Many people find that they self-harm following conflict or pain in a relationship.

**Ways to stop harming yourself - This is a crisis list. These are immediate short-term solutions. Please tick those that you feel you might try ...**

- Try to delay the act in any way you can. Go for a run, clean the house, go to the shops.
- Find some company.** Most people self-harm when alone so go to a public place, be with a good friend or a safe family member. This may prevent you from harming yourself.
- Distract yourself.** Flick through a magazine, try the crossword, tidy up.
- Try the **10-minute delay tactic.** Say to yourself that you will wait 10 minutes to self-harm. When the time is up, think again. Can you wait another 10 minutes?
- Do something for **yourself.** Eat something nice, pamper yourself, buy yourself something.
- Do something for **someone else** such as your friend, child or partner.
- Try **relaxation** and **breathing exercises.** Sit back comfortably in a chair or lie out on a bed. Relax all muscles in your body, beginning at the feet and

working upwards. Concentrate on your breathing: breathe in for 5 seconds through your nose, hold your breath for 5 seconds, then breathe out slowly.

Repeat this.

- Use other **strong sensations** to help distract you. Try loud music, a cold shower, a fast run, squeeze something very hard, smell strong perfume, eat hot chillies.
- Exercise.** Jog, run, swim, cycle, dance, run up and down stairs.
- Call a **friend** or someone you trust.
- Plan** something. A holiday, a night out, to do some voluntary work, to take up some study, or join a club.
- Keep away** from things you may use to harm yourself eg knives, razors, glass.
- Shout out loud** “No” or “Stop”. This helps some people to delay the self-harm.
- Try to be clear about what you are **feeling** – is the emotion you are feeling: fear, shame or guilt, anxiety, anger, rage, sadness or depression? Try and observe, label and accept the emotion. Ask yourself why **you** are feeling it. Remember that you are not your emotion – you don’t have to act on it.

## If you feel you must hurt yourself

- Try **less** destructive ways of doing it. For example, pinching yourself instead of cutting, or holding an ice-cube in your hand.
- **Do not share** razors or implements with other people because of the risk of HIV and hepatitis. Use clean implements.
- If you are cutting yourself think of the **scarring** that will be left in the future. Avoid deep cuts.
- Try not to feel **too angry** with yourself for having done it. Try to make some longer term plans (see below) to avoid doing it in the future. Recognise that it is a difficult pattern to break.
- Learn to **clean and dress cuts** to avoid infection.
- Remember that if you overdose you are no longer in control of what happens. Even small overdoses can kill.

Some people feel they need to keep using self-harm until they have progressed with other issues.

## What longer-term solutions are there?

### Do I really want to stop harming myself?

Use this to list the pros and cons of self-harming, the good things and the bad. Make sure to list all the negatives – the scars, the waste of time and energy, the risk of permanent injury and even death, etc. (look back at the reasons other people have given).

Reasons to continue self-harming	Reasons to stop self-harming

### Can I improve the way I communicate?

If you feel that self-harm is a way that you communicate emotional pain, then it may be helpful to work on communicating in other ways.

The following are important questions to ask yourself:

### What do I feel like when I harm myself?

- Have I ever tried to express in words how bad I feel?
- If not, could I think of words to describe what I feel like?
- Could I share this with anyone? (A friend, family member, therapist)
- Might it help to write it down first of all?
- What do I fear might be the response of those people to what I have to say?

Try to learn to describe how you feel. Try to learn to say no when you would like to. Courses and books on learning to be assertive are widely available. Try assertiveness training. Ask a friend to go with you if your confidence is very low.

### **Do I blame myself for everything?**

Many people who harm themselves have experienced some physical, sexual or emotional abuse in their past. Unfortunately they often feel they must take the blame for what has happened to them even if they were very young when this abuse occurred. It can help to reconsider this self-blame. Try this approach. Imagine a friend told you a story almost identical to your own – would you blame him or her because someone else abused them? If not, then why do you continue to blame yourself for what happened to you?

### **Am I looking after myself?**

Take good care of yourself; allow yourself relaxation, pleasures, time for yourself, luxury. Don't allow yourself to feel guilty about this. It is what you need and deserve.

Are there issues from my childhood that I need to understand? If there are, try and talk them over with someone. Find a therapist who may be able to help you review this area of your life. Ask your GP about this.

### **How can I cope with overwhelming feelings?**

Try **self-calming techniques**. Try relaxation of the body (see the booklet in this series about managing anxiety). Or ask your GP about medication. Use the senses to calm yourself.

#### **Touch**

Massage yourself, especially your face and shoulders. Touch some soft fabric, such as silk or velvet. Concentrate on the feelings and learn to enjoy them.

#### **Hearing**

Listen to some soothing music. Concentrate on the sounds around you. Learn to enjoy sounds.

#### **Vision**

Look at a beautiful picture, film or object. Concentrate on it and try to enjoy the pleasure of it.

#### **Smell**

Try perfume, flower scent, or the smell of coffee. Spend some time concentrating on this.

#### **Taste**

Taste and slowly appreciate something you really enjoy.

## **Use your imagination**

Picture pleasant scenes and feelings. Give yourself time and space to try out these things.

## **How can I replace some of the unhelpful things I've used for coping?**

Make a list of things you might enjoy and build these into your day. Here are some examples:

- Listening to music.
- Looking round the shops.
- Eating chocolate.
- Going to see a film or renting a video.
- Watching sport.
- Going out on a trip.
- Reading a good book.
- Doing nothing.
- Reading the paper in peace.
- Going out with friends.
- Doing some sport.

Make sure there are some good things happening each day and each week. Plan ahead. Build these moments into your life.

## **What about my relationships?**

Look at the relationships you have. Nurture the good ones and end those that might be destructive. If similar destructive relationships are happening to you again and again then try to think what goes wrong. Talk it over with someone. Try to think how you can break the cycle.

## **What about self-help?**

There are addresses at the back of this booklet for contacts for self-help groups and organisations. The Internet can also be a good source of advice but some websites may be distressing. Some good websites are also listed at the back of this booklet.

## **How can I help a friend or family member who self harms?**

It may help to:

- **Recognise** how distressed the person is **even if they don't seem to be**. Encourage their attempts to control self-harm and don't despair or become

angry if they fail to control it.

- Keep an **accepting** attitude towards it. Try to discuss it and try to help him or her to think of ways to control it.
- Get **medical help** if the injuries are serious.
- Discuss with them the idea of seeing a **therapist**. The GP is a good first port of call for this.
- **Be there** for them.
- Encourage the person to stay in **company**, where they will be less likely to harm themselves.
- Seek **support** yourself if the problem continues.
- Offer **practical help** (eg look after children, go shopping with the person etc).
- Give them **time** and talk on their terms.

## Where can I get further help?

We hope the information in this booklet will be helpful to you in beginning to understand self-harm.

It is important to manage the anxiety and depression that people who self-harm often experience. Discuss this with your GP, who may offer medication and advice. Remember that there are other booklets in this series that give advice on coping with anxiety, panic and depression.

It may be helpful for you to seek further support. Your GP may be the best person to talk to first. He or she may suggest you see a therapist. This could be a trained psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, nurse therapist or psychiatrist.

There are other sources of support available to those people who harm themselves (some useful websites are included):

**The internet can be a source of help but please use with caution as some of the content may be distressing.**

## National Organisations

- **National Self-Harm Network.** P.O Box 16190, London, NW1 3WW. An organisation campaigning for the rights of people who self-harm and understanding of self-harm among all age groups. [www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk)
- **Bristol Crisis Service for Women,** P.O. Box 654, Bristol, BS99 1HX. Office helpline Tel: 0117 9251119 – Friday and Saturday 9.00 pm – 12.30 am. A telephone help line for women. Also research into women and self-harm. [www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk](http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk)

## Counselling and Psychotherapy

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy.** Information and advice about counselling and psychotherapy. Tel: 01455 883316. [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)
- **Women's Therapy Centre.** 6-9 Manor Gardens, London, N7 6LA. Tel: 0207 263 7860. Services for survivors of sexual abuse and training for workers. Face-to-face counselling and groups.

## Self-Help/Help lines

- **Shout.** Women's bi-monthly newsletter on self-harm. Produced by women who have experience of self-harm. Further information about SHOUT at the Bristol Crisis Service. (described above).
- **The Mental Health Foundation,** has a helpful website [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) Tel: 0207 8031101.
- **Mind Information Line.** Tel: 0845 7660163. Monday and Friday 10.00am – 12.30 pm and 2.00 pm – 4.30 pm. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday 2.00pm – 4.30pm. [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk).  
MIND's Information Service can provide details of Local MIND Associations, groups for people with eating problems and people who have experienced sexual abuse. They can also provide information about support groups for carers.
- **National Debt Line.** Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt. Tel: 0808 808 4000 (Freephone). [www.nationaldebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk)
- **NHS Direct.** Telephone Help line/Health Information Service. Talk confidentially to a nurse or information officer. Calls charged at local rate, Tel: 0845 4647.
- **Samaritans.** The national number is 08457 909 090 or consult the inside cover of a telephone directory. 24-hour service. [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk).

## The following books may also be helpful:

- **The Scarred Soul: Understanding and Ending Self-Inflicted Violence.** Tracy Alderman. New Harbinger (1997).
- **Breaking free. Help for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse.** Carolyn Aniscough and Kay Toon. Insight, London (1993).
- **For Friends and Family: A Guide for Supporters of Women and Girls who Self-Injure.** Lois Arnold. Bristol Crisis Service for Women (1998).
- **The Courage to Heal.** E Bass and L Davis. Harper & Row Publishers, New York (1994).
- **Overcoming Low Self-Esteem.** Melanie Fennell. Robinson Publishing, London (1999).
- **Women who Hurt Themselves.** D. Miller. BasicBooks, New York (1994).
- **Self-Injury Support and Self Help Groups.** Karin Parker and Hilary Lindsay. Bristol Crisis Service for Women (1998).
- **Healing the Hurt Within: Understand and Relieve the Suffering Behind Self-Destructive Behaviour.** J Sutton. How to Books Ltd. New edition 2005.

Thank you to all those people who commented on and helped with this booklet in particular service users in the North East.

**This leaflet can be made available in a range of formats on request (eg Braille, audio, large print). Please contact the Patient Information Centre on Tel: 0191 223 2545**

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