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# UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM

**BUGB Guide to Understanding Self-Harm**

**The Baptist Union of Great Britain**

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## WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is the intentional damage or injury to a person's own body. It is used as a way of coping with or expressing overwhelming emotional distress. Self-harm can be a physical act, such as cutting, or it can be less obvious such as a person putting themselves in risky situations or neglecting their own physical or emotional needs.

**There are many forms of self-harm including:**

- Cutting
- Burning
- Overeating or undereating
- Inserting objects into their own body
- Scratching
- Hair pulling
- Poisoning
- Hitting themselves or walls
- Overdosing
- Intentionally putting themselves in risky situations
- Exercising excessively

*Please note: This is not an exhaustive list*

In addition, self-neglect is a form of self-harm whereby an adult neglects their own physical health, mental health or personal care needs, including hygiene and nutrition.

Some of the reasons people give for self-harming include:

- Converting emotional pain into physical pain
- Expressing something that is hard to put into words
- Feeling that they are in control
- Creating a reason to physically care for themselves
- Reducing overwhelming feelings or thoughts
- Wanting to feel something instead of numbness or disconnection
- Communicating to others that they are experiencing severe distress

Some people can find the process of self-harm to be very addictive. The act of physically harming themselves causes the body to produce endorphins, resulting in a momentary euphoria. Over time the effect lessens, and it becomes necessary to self-harm in bigger and more damaging ways in order to achieve the same sensation.

Others don't find self-harming addictive in a physical sense, but they may become emotionally dependent on it. It may initially be used to stop unwanted thoughts or feelings, and before long it is being used daily to prevent these thoughts or feelings from ever surfacing.

### Who self-harms?

Self-harm can affect anyone, anywhere, at any time in their life. It is not limited to a particular age or gender, although it is most widely associated with young people.

It is difficult to know the exact numbers of people who self-harm, but it is thought that around 1 in 6 young people aged under 18 years old will self-harm at some point. Research also suggests that children who are exposed to other people self-harming may be more likely to begin harming themselves.\*

Adults who self-harm may have done so since childhood, resulting in the damaging behaviour pattern being their normal way of dealing with stresses.

However it is important to remember that not everyone who self-harms will continue to do so in the future. Some people may only do it once or twice, or just during a period of exceptional stress

*\*Facts and figures have been taken from publications by Alumina, Mind and the NHS.*

### Why do people self-harm?

There are many reasons why people self-harm. For some it may be a way of dealing with difficult feelings and memories or overwhelming situations and experiences. It may be linked to specific experiences in the past or to something that is happening now. Some people will not be able to explain or pinpoint the reasons for their self-harming behaviour.

Self-harming is not in itself a mental illness, nor is it a suicide attempt. It is not attention-seeking behaviour, and in reality, most people keep their self-harm private.

However, it may be a warning sign that the person is experiencing trauma, such as sexual, physical or emotional abuse or bullying. It may also be that they are dealing with an underlying mental health problem, such as depression.

Common causes of self-harm include:

- Pressures at school or work
- Bullying
- Money worries
- Physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- Bereavement
- Confusion about sexuality
- Relationship breakdown
- Illness or health problem
- Events affecting a loved one (such as divorce, chronic illness, financial problems, etc.)
- Difficult feelings such as anxiety, depression, anger, or numbness experienced as part of a mental health problem

*Please Note: These are not exhaustive lists and there may be other causes or reasons why someone starts to self-harm.*

## Possible indicators of self-harm.

People tend to hide their self-harm behaviour, keeping it a secret from their friends and family and often injuring themselves in places that can be hidden easily by clothing. Therefore, it is not always easy to notice if someone is self-harming.

### Some of the possible indicators of self-harm include:

- Unexplained cuts, bruises and burns, usually found on the person's wrists, arms, thighs and chest
- Keeping themselves fully covered at all times, even in hot weather
- Depression - including low mood, tearfulness and a lack of motivation or interest
- Becoming withdrawn and not speaking to others
- Changes in eating habits or being secretive about eating, and any unusual weight loss or weight gain
- Signs of low self-esteem - such as blaming themselves for problems or thinking they are 'not good enough' for something
- Misuse of alcohol or drugs and/or substances
- Bald patches from pulling out hair

There may, of course, be other reasons for the indicators shown above, but these are the most common indicators that an individual could be self-harming.

## Responding to self-harm

People who self-harm often find that the immediate relief of harming themselves is quickly replaced by an even greater sense of distress. It is only through talking about and understanding the emotions involved that the compulsion to self-harm can be reduced and eventually taken away.

Here are some tips which may be helpful if someone discloses to you that they are self-harming:

- It is crucial that the person receives a supportive response. Negative reactions may cause them to refrain from disclosing or talking about self-harm again, thereby preventing them from receiving the support they so desperately need.
- Invite them to talk about their self-harm in a safe environment and give gentle, empathetic support.
- Listen to them without judgement, criticism or anger, and express that you understand that they are finding things difficult.
- Do not tell them simply to stop. This is unhelpful and could make things worse.
- Do not promise confidentiality as, depending on the circumstances, other people may need to become involved. Where possible, ask for consent to share the disclosure. You should be aware that for under 18's or adults at risk who lack mental capacity you should report self-harm to the church's designated person for safeguarding whether or not you have the individual's consent.
- Explore the possible options for them to access support. This may include school, parents, carers, local support groups, Social Care Services, Mental Health Services, their GP or specialist self-harm organisations. (please see the 'Key Contacts' section for national support organisations)
- Self-harm disclosures should be reported to your church's Designated Person for Safeguarding who may seek further advice and support from the Regional Safeguarding Lead or the statutory authorities depending on the circumstances involved.

## Continuing to self-harm after disclosure

Self-harm doesn't automatically stop when you confront or acknowledge it. Sometimes it can be even harder for someone to stop after they see that their behaviour causes distress to their family and friends.

The guilt of causing upset to loved ones can push them to harm as a way of coping with the emotions of others. The fear of people finding out that they are continuing to self-harm can push the behaviour further underground, making it more secretive and therefore more difficult to resolve. This highlights the need for great sensitivity when handling self-harm disclosures.

## Education and support for children and young people

Children and young people who are exposed to the self-harming of others may be more likely to begin harming themselves. Therefore, it is important that siblings and friends receive support to understand self-harm, as well as the self-harming individual.

The resources section at the end of this guide provides signposts to great information and resources for those working with children and young people.

## SUICIDAL FEELINGS

Although for most people self-harm is not a precursor to a suicide attempt, research shows that, those who self-harm are more likely to take their lives than those who don't. This could be either intentionally or accidentally. Statistically we know that younger men are particularly vulnerable to suicide.

Suicide is a complex issue, and feeling suicidal can be an incredibly frightening and painful experience. A person with suicidal feelings may:

- Believe death is their only option
- Feel worthless and helpless
- Feel that things won't ever get better
- Have feelings of low self-esteem
- Feel overwhelmed and unable to cope
- Be angry at themselves
- Feel isolated and alone
- Feel that they are not understood by anyone
- Not be sure if they want to live or die

These feelings may have appeared suddenly, or they may have developed gradually over time. They may be the result of a particular incident or problem or be caused by a combination of different factors. It can be very difficult for someone who is contemplating suicide to tell others how they feel. As much as they might feel that they want to die, they may also want to find a way forward, and to have others understand how they are feeling. Yet for many people in this situation opening up and talking about it can feel almost impossible.

## Providing Support to someone who is having suicidal feelings

If someone does share with you that they have had or are having suicidal feelings, it can be extremely upsetting for you to discover that they are talking about the possibility of taking their own life. It is common to feel helpless, scared and even angry in response.

There are several ways in which you can help someone who is experiencing suicidal thoughts:

- Talk to them – ask them how they feel and listen quietly to their response. Try not to worry about saying the right thing. Instead, keep your focus on simply being there to listen and to allow them to be heard.
- Try not to judge – it is not helpful to tell them that suicide is wrong or to get angry and frustrated at the thought of them throwing their life away. As hard as it is, try to listen without judgement.
- Encourage them to get help – find out about local support available, and gently encourage them to get help.
- Don't assume that you know what help they need. Always ask them. They may be aware of things which have helped them in the past as well as what they struggle to do themselves – for example, they may appreciate you offering to book doctor's appointments or going to appointments with them. Simply your company and some simple activities on difficult days may help.

## Looking after yourself

If you are able to provide some support, make sure that you look after yourself as well – it is emotionally draining to support someone who is experiencing suicidal feelings. Try not to blame yourself or hold their decision to want to end their life as your responsibility. Make sure you take time to get the emotional support you need to enable you to continue supporting them.

If you do not feel able to provide support, talk to the person about involving someone else in your church who might be better able to help them.

## Disclosure requirements

Where possible, you should always ask for the person's consent to share their disclosure. However, for under 18's or adults at risk who lack mental capacity, it is necessary to report to your church's Designated Person for Safeguarding who may seek further advice and support from your Regional Safeguarding Lead.

For more information about supporting someone who has suicidal feelings, Mind have created an easy to read downloadable guide which can be found on their website [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

## KEY CONTACTS

Responding to people who are self-harming or experiencing suicidal feelings needs to be approached sensitively and on a case-by-case basis. Please don't feel that you have to handle this by yourself. The Designated Person for Safeguarding at your church can seek further advice and support if needed, including support from your Regional Safeguarding Lead.

Giving up self-harming may mean that the feelings the person has been trying to avoid may now come to the surface, which can be a very frightening prospect for them. This is why it is important for people to have the chance to talk about how they feel, and to find and learn new ways of coping. There are a number of speciality organisations who support and help those who self-harm. For further information and expert advice please contact:

### Alumina

An online course started by Youthscape for young people aged between 10 & 17, to help them think about why they self-harm and what their next step might be.

<http://alumina.selfharm.co.uk/>

### Harmless

User-led organisation for people who self-harm and their friends and family.

[www.harmless.org.uk](http://www.harmless.org.uk)

### NSPCC

Children's charity fighting to end and prevent child abuse in the UK including giving advice about self-harm.

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

0808 800 5000

### Mind

Mental health charity offering advice and support. Mind have published a downloadable resource called '*Understanding Self-harm*,' aimed at those who self-harm and their friends and family.

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

0300 123 3393

### Papyrus

Charity working to prevent young people (up to 35 years) committing suicide, through counselling and support, training and campaigning.

[www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

0800 068 4141

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### Samaritans

24-hour helpline which offers emotional support and a confidential listening service for anyone who needs to talk. Not just for those feeling suicidal.

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

08457 90 90 90

### Head Strong

An online organisation that offers information, advice, support and training on the subject of self-harm. It is primarily focused on self-harming young people and those who work with them.

[www.beheadstrong.uk](http://www.beheadstrong.uk)

### Young Minds

Information for parents and young people about mental health and wellbeing.

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

020 7089 5050 (general enquiries)

0808 802 5544 (parents helpline)



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