

Self-harm and self-injury

Self-harm/self-injury might be part of your experience now but it does not have to be in the future – you can learn to care for yourself emotionally and physically.

Changing your self-harming habits is about learning to cope with your urges to self-harm, identifying new ways to express how you feel, having the right support and improving your general health and wellbeing.

Self-harm refers to people deliberately hurting their bodies. It is usually done in secret and on places of the body that may not be seen by others. The most common type of self-harm is cutting, but there are many other types of self-harm including burning or punching the body, or picking skin or sores.

Self-harm is a term that has historically been used to cover a broad range of behaviours. It refers to deliberately causing pain or damage to your own body, and can be suicidal or non-suicidal in intent.

Self-injury is a sub-category of self-harm, and refers to deliberately causing pain or damage to your own body without suicidal intent.

Many people find self-harm challenging and distressing and you may get a negative reaction when talking about it. Some people, including some health professionals, may be judgmental and dismiss what you are going through – usually because they don't understand it.

Try not to let this stop you from seeking support. Call a helpline like the *beyondblue* Support Service to talk it through and find other options for getting the help you need.

People of all ages, backgrounds, cultures and experiences self-harm. Exactly how many is hard to know because so much of people's self-harm is hidden. Available research suggests that about 1 per cent of Australians have self-harmed within the last month and about 8 per cent have self-harmed in their lifetime.¹

Why do people self-harm?

In general people self-harm as a way of coping. People often talk about harming themselves as a way to relieve, control or express distressing feelings, thoughts or memories. Some people harm themselves because they feel alone, while others self-harm to punish themselves due to feelings of guilt or shame. The relief they experience after self-harming however is only short term and at some point the difficult feelings usually return. With the return of these feelings often comes an urge to self-harm again. This cycle of self-harm can often be difficult to break.

How often someone self-harms can vary. Some people may self-harm once, others occasionally, then there are those who self-harm regularly. The frequency of self-harm is often related to emotional distress; so the more distress a person feels, the more often they are likely to self-harm.

There are some common stresses that can trigger self-harm; these may include work problems, difficulties in relationships, bullying, low self-esteem, sexual problems and alcohol or drug abuse. Self-harm can also occur for people experiencing a mental health condition, such as anxiety and depression.

Most people who self-harm are not trying to kill themselves but there is a chance that they may hurt themselves more than they intended to; this increases their risk of accidental suicide. People who repeatedly self-harm may also become suicidal and feel hopeless and trapped.

Finding other ways to cope

It is possible to learn to manage really intense feelings in ways that do not cause harm, and many of these alternatives can also offer you relief in the longer term. It can be hard, and at times confronting to break free from your self-harming habits, but just take it one step at a time.

Your first step is to decide that you want things to be different; that you want a longer term solution to how you cope. Some people can begin this process on their own but many need the support of their friends and family.

If the self-harming is particularly intense or long term then the support of a health professional will be essential.

Recognise when you do and don't self-harm

- Learn more about your habits. Identify the usual times, places and feelings that trigger your self-harm.
- Try to make an effort to do more of the things that make you feel better and help you stop self-harming.
- Consider keeping a journal to track your habits.

Set realistic goals

- Set yourself realistic goals to work towards and reward all your achievements, even the small ones.
- Be kind to yourself; giving up self-harm and trying new ways to cope takes time.
- Consider using a problem-solving approach when problems arise; identify the issue, come up with some options for how you could respond, work out the pros and cons of each option, and give an option a try. This approach often helps you to see that there are other ways in which you could handle the situation.

Learn to change your focus

- Try to find some alternative options for how to think about things that are more helpful or positive. This change in how you think about things can also change how you feel. For example, try to avoid "Everything is terrible and nothing will ever change", but instead "That was a really horrible experience but hopefully it won't happen again".

- Do something different when the self-harming thoughts return, such as taking some deep breaths, having a shower, or having something to eat or drink. Other options to try might include holding ice cubes in your hand, snapping a rubber band on your wrist, exercising, eating a chilli, focusing on something positive around you, or talking to someone. Often the urge to self-harm will lessen after a period of time.
- Develop your mindfulness and relaxation skills. This might mean listening to music, going for a brisk walk or run, or doing some guided relaxation or mindfulness exercises. There are many online mindfulness and relaxation programs and apps that you could try, such as smilingmind.com.au
- Remind yourself of your positive skills and work to keep building on these strengths.

Find helpful ways to express yourself

- Talk openly to people you trust to get their understanding and support.
- Don't build up worries, anger or disappointments – talk about them.
- If you need to talk about your urge to self-harm and you can't contact the first person you call, try someone else.
- Be patient if people need some time to understand your situation and how they can help.

If you don't feel comfortable talking to a family member or friend, you can try your doctor, a counsellor or call a crisis line, like Lifeline – 13 11 14.

Get support

- Find a health professional in person, online or over the phone. A counsellor, psychologist or doctor can help you to improve your problem solving, communication and coping skills. Finding someone that you can relate to can take a few tries.

- Understand that you might have to talk about difficult things sometimes, but that's part of learning new ways to cope. The health professional will support you through this process.
- 'Talking therapies' including cognitive behavioural therapy, dialectical behavioural therapy, mindfulness and problem solving therapy are all approaches that have shown to be beneficial to people who self-harm.
- Persevere. It can take a while before you notice the benefits.
- Take advantage of the care that is offered if you end up spending some time in hospital. This could be a good chance to learn more about your options for healthier coping.

Look after yourself

- Look after your health – eat well, exercise and try to have a regular sleeping habit. Spend time doing things that you enjoy, with people you enjoy being with.
- Avoid or try limiting the amount of alcohol or drugs you use as they often make you feel worse.
- Think about what to do and who you can call in emergencies. Lifeline might be one of your options.
- Look after your injuries – bandage and clean your injuries to avoid infection. If you hurt yourself more than you expect get medical advice from your local doctor or hospital or call [healthdirect](http://healthdirect.gov.au) on 1800 022 222.
- If your thoughts change from wanting to harm yourself to being hopeless and thinking about suicide, talk to someone about it. Lifeline or the *beyondblue* Support Service are always available to talk to you.

It can take time for you to develop new ways of coping with intense feelings of distress. While you find your way it is important to look after yourself by setting realistic goals, learning to problem solve, doing things that you enjoy and getting the right support.

Giving up self-harm and trying new ways to cope takes time and patience but you will begin to see that you don't have to hurt yourself to feel better; there are other ways.

How family and friends can help

While there can be obvious signs that someone is self-harming, such as exposed cuts and burns, there are some less obvious signs that someone may be self-harming. Some include dramatic changes in mood, being secretive, avoiding situations where they have to expose arms or legs, strange excuses for injuries and withdrawing from usual life. However, many of these signs could also be due to a range of other issues or difficulties.

If you are worried about someone who is self-harming there are a range of things that you can do to support them.

Talk about it

- Talk openly about your concerns. It can be a hard conversation at first so approach it with care, respect and without judgment. If they do not want to talk try again another time or suggest other people that they may be able to confide in.
- Listen carefully so you can begin to understand how they feel and why.
- Try to remain calm even though that may not be how you feel. It is common to feel confused, angry, scared and frustrated by what is going on.

Offer support

- Decide how you can support them in a way that works for both of you. You might help them to strengthen their problem-solving skills, enable them to do more of the things they enjoy or help them to identify the things that make them feel better.
- Help them make a plan for when they feel like self-harming.
- Encourage them to seek professional help. Offer to help to organise an appointment or go with them if they would find this useful. Support services are available online, in person or over the phone.
- Learn more about self-harm online or from your local doctor/health professionals.

Help them stay safe

- Be realistic about change. You can't stop someone from self-harming. They need to first find other ways to cope, but this can take time. In the meantime help them to look after themselves as best they can.

- Ask if they have thought about suicide. Talking about suicide does not create extra stress but instead gives them a chance to talk openly about it. If they have made plans to end their life, help them stay safe. Let them talk about how they feel and why. Encourage them to see their doctor, call the *beyondblue* Support Service or Lifeline to make a plan to keep them safe and feel supported.

Look after yourself

It can be overwhelming and at times distressing to know someone you care about is self-harming. Do your best to be patient and non-judgmental, and offer hope as they care for themselves in new and healthier ways. To look after others you need to also look after yourself.

- Try to get enough sleep, keep fit and healthy, and do things that you enjoy.
- Seek your own support from friends or professionals.

References

- ¹ Martin, G., Swannell, S., Harrison, J., Hazell, P., & Taylor, A. (2010). *The Australian National Epidemiological Study of Self-Injury (ANESSI)*. Centre for Suicide Prevention Studies: Brisbane, Australia.

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

📞 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Lifeline

www.lifeline.org.au

13 11 14

Head to Health

headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



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