

Coping Strategies

Here are some alternative strategies to self harm that may be helpful for you to think about and discuss with the young person who you are concerned about:

- Hold an ice-cube in your hand
- Draw on your skin with a red marker pen
- Place a flake of chilli on your tongue
- Put an elastic band around your wrist and flick it
- Play with a stress ball or make one
- Keep busy – shop till you drop, Hoover, polish the table, have a warm shower
- Apply a henna tattoo to your arm or body
- Ride the wave, accept the urge, but distract yourself by counting it down until its gone
- Tear up paper or pop bubble wrap
- Have a 'crisis box' with all the things you love in it
- Beat the negative thoughts with a 'be strong' letter or poem–read aloud
- Listen to music that lifts your mood
- Draw a butterfly on your wrist with a marker. Keep it alive by not cutting



In an emergency call **999** and ask for an ambulance or take the Young Person to A&E.



Kent County Council Early Help Service
03000 419222

For advice and guidance and to seek additional support from local organisations.



Kent County Council Specialist Children's Services
03000 411111

To seek specialist advice and support from Kent County Council's Social Services team.



Police non-emergency number
101

Call this number to report any concerns that do not require an emergency response or if you need advice or support from the Police.



NHS Direct
111



Young Minds
Parents/Caregivers helpline
0808 802 5544



NSPCC helpline
Parents/Caregivers helpline
0808 800 5000
or text 88858

Please email any comments or queries to the leaflet's author: T.A.Nice@kent.ac.uk

This publication is available in other formats and can be explained in a range of languages. Helpline: **03000 421553**
Email: alternativeformats@kent.gov.uk

Self-harm

A Guide for Parents and Carers for those Young People who Self-harm



 **Kent Safeguarding Children Board**

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Professional Practice

This guide has been written for parents and carers of young people that self-harm. It has been written to educate and inform them at a time when many parents and carers feel powerless, helpless and confused. To discover that your child or young person is self-harming can be very upsetting, alarming and anxiety provoking. Parents and carers may blame themselves for not being good enough or feel that they have failed to protect their children from difficult life issues or traumatic events. This is a natural reaction to the discovery of self-harm.

What is Self-harm?

There are many different names and definitions for self-harm, since it covers a wide range of behaviours from self-cutting, burning, picking, bruising, scratching, swallowing, self-poisoning and self-strangulation to name but a few. The definition that is most commonly used is:

'any act of self-poisoning or self-injury carried out by an individual irrespective of motivation. This commonly involves self-poisoning with medication or self-injury by cutting (NICE 2011).

Historically, people have engaged in self-harm in all manner of ways, as a spiritual, religious, cultural or socio-political statement. Today, we seem to have a large number of young people who try and cope with their distress or suffering by taking overdoses or by injuring their bodies.

During adolescence changes occur in the body, in the self, with parents, at school and with mates. This can happen so fast that the young person gets confused, upset and lost. This is when they most need your support.



What Makes Young People Self-harm?

Young people self-harm for a variety of reasons, but what appears to be common themes running through these behaviours is stress and distress. Often it is difficult for children and young people to cope with the demands and pressures of home, school, friends and peers. Sometimes things just get 'too much' for young people and they resort to self-harm.

"I don't want to die. I just want this pain to stop. The only way I can get some relief from this emotional pain is by physically hurting myself" (young person, NSHN, 2013).

It can be a way of expressing and coping with unbearable emotions and negative thoughts that underlie difficult states of mind. It can be thought of as 'an escape' or 'a release' from these feelings and thoughts. The body acts as something real, concrete and physical; self-harm helps to make mental pain visible, real and easier to cope with.

"When I feel numb or go to the place where I disconnect from reality I need to feel pain to bring me back to the here and now, nothing else will ground me. The pain makes me realise that I'm really here" (Young Person, NSHN, 2013).

What can I do?

As a parent or caregiver it is important to listen and to respond sensitively to your child or young person. This means remaining calm and taking the time to understand what they are trying to tell you.

- Be gently curious if you notice cuts or injuries to the young person – every cut tells a story, every scar cries out
- Take their self-harm seriously
- Do not be judgemental or dismissive
- Stay calm, sensitive and thoughtful
- It is important not to ignore or avoid the issues of self-harm, hoping that it will go away
- Respectfully ask the young person how are they feeling and what you can do to help
- Help the young person to problem solve by thinking with them
- Positively supervise and monitor the young person – have a plan of action
- Seek help from a trusted professional

