

A Guide to understanding and coping with common mental health issues.

Issues covered in this guide include:

- Warning Signs of a Mental Health Crisis
- Coping With Anxiety
- Coping With Depression
- Coping With Stress
- Coping With Bullying & Cyber-bullying
- Active Listening and how it can help

#### Help And Assistance

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family get immediate support and information 24/7 by FreeTexting **HELP** to **50015**. Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit.

For information on Emergency Contacts, National Helplines, Local Support Groups and your nearest Places of Safety visit [www.ineedhelp.ie](http://www.ineedhelp.ie)

Always call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured, and their life is at risk.

Gardaí / Ambulance / Fire call 999 or 112

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# Coping *with* SELF-HARM



**WARNING SIGNS OF A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS**  
Short guides to coping with common mental health issues

# Coping *with*

# SELF-HARM

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In recent years, society has become much more aware of self-harm and the distress it represents. In many communities, mental health and self-harm are becoming better understood, which may help some people to be more open in revealing that they hurt themselves to manage their feelings of distress. Rather than being hidden or not talked about, self-harm is also portrayed more commonly on TV and in films.

With this increasing social and media visibility, you may feel more able to reach out and ask for help with self-harm if you need it. In this article we will look at what self-harm is, why someone might self-harm, and what you can do to start to manage it.

## What is Self-Harm?

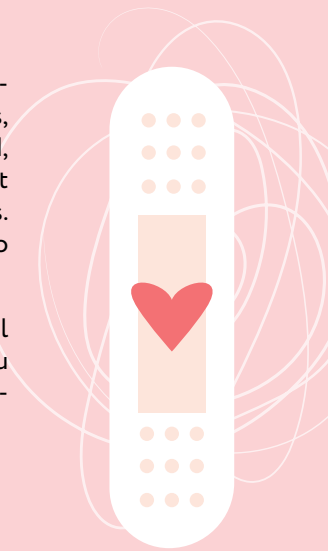
Self-harm can take many forms, but it involves hurting yourself on purpose. Self-harm is not a mental illness in itself, but it is often linked to mental distress. This means that those who self-harm may have underlying anxiety, depression or another mental health diagnosis.

Self-harm can also occur in those who have not received a formal mental health diagnosis. This means that if you self-harm, you may have underlying depression or anxiety, even if a doctor has not told you that you do.

While some people self-harm once or twice, others will hurt themselves more regularly. Some people might feel like they need to self-harm every day.

You may feel ashamed or worried about what others would think of you if they knew that you hurt yourself. For this reason, it is common for those who self-harm not to have told anyone about it, and to keep self-harming in secret. If you do tell friends or family, or are discovered to be self-harming, you may worry that others will find it difficult to understand why you self-harm. These worries may lead you to keep your self-harm a secret. However, speaking to others about it can be a helpful way to begin recovering from self-harm.

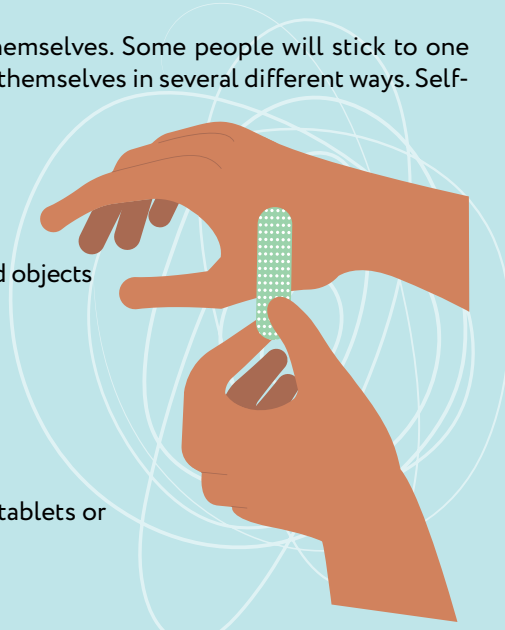
If you self-harm now, it doesn't mean that you will self-harm forever. Many people are able to stop self-harming when their mental health begins to improve. This may involve seeking support from a counsellor or your doctor. Some healthcare professionals are also trained to help you manage self-harm and find alternative coping strategies while you begin to address the distress you are feeling. It will take time and dedication to address the patterns of self-harm and to eventually stop, but it is possible with the correct support.



# Types of Self-Harm

There are many ways that people hurt themselves. Some people will stick to one method of self-harm, and others will hurt themselves in several different ways. Self-harm may include the following:

- Cutting
- Scratching your skin
- Not allowing cuts or wounds to heal
- Banging parts of your body against hard objects
- Burning
- Scalding with hot or boiling water
- Pulling hair out
- Inserting sharp items into your body
- Taking something that is poisonous
- Taking an overdose (taking too many tablets or another substance).



# What Causes Someone to Self-Harm?

People who self-harm often do so to help them manage the way they are feeling. If you are feeling sad, low, ashamed, or hopeless, you can feel very uncomfortable in yourself. Some people who self-harm find that the process of hurting themselves helps to distract from the emotional pain they might be feeling. Self-harming becomes a coping mechanism for helping to manage overwhelming emotions.

## Helping to get relief

Feeling distressed can be unbearable, and some people find that self-harming gives them relief from the emotional turmoil. This is sometimes described as a release. Some people find that self-harming makes them feel normal or real, or gives them 'a rush' if they have been feeling flat or low.

Self-harming can feel like a distraction, providing something else to focus on and offering a break from anger or sadness.

## A way of communicating

When you are feeling overwhelmed, it can be hard to put your emotions into words. For some people, self-harm is a way of communicating the distress they are feeling. This can be misinterpreted as attention seeking, but in those who do reveal their self-harm, it is more likely to be a way of expressing just how upset or anxious they are feeling.

## A form of punishment

Some people use self-harm to punish themselves. They may feel that they have done something wrong, or that they shouldn't feel the way that they do. In some cases, you may be justified in feeling angry towards someone else, but this anger becomes directed inwards at yourself. Self-harm becomes a way to manage things that feel like your fault.

## Finding some control

Self-harm can feel like a form of control. If other things in your life feel like they are being controlled by others, hurting yourself can feel like a way that you can take charge.



# How Do I Recognise Self-Harm in Others?

Some methods of self-harm are more obvious than others. It can be easier to spot self-harm in others if it involves cutting, burning, scalding, or taking an overdose, for example. However, some types of self-harm are less obvious, and you may not realise that what your friend is doing is a form of self-harm.

Signs of self-harm might include:

- Cuts, bruises or burns on the skin, especially the arms or legs
- Refusing to remove long sleeve tops or wearing trousers or tights, even when it is hot
- Not getting changed in front of others, for example in PE

- Pulling their hair out
- Picking at wounds or scabs so that they won't heal
- Over-eating or under-eating



If you notice these signs in a friend, you may feel able to ask them about how they are feeling, or if they want to talk about what you have noticed. If you do not feel able to ask them, or they deny that anything is wrong, you should seek advice from a parent or teacher and explain what you are worried about.

## Are Self-Harm and Suicide Linked?

Knowing that someone else is self-harming can be very frightening for friends or relatives. This can be, in part, because they worry that it may be a sign that you either want to, or are trying to, end your life.

Those who self-harm are not usually trying to end their lives. Instead, they are trying to find a way to make life feel better or easier. However, self-harm can be dangerous, and there is a chance that you could accidentally end your life by seriously hurting yourself.

## What Can I Do to Cope with Self-Harm?



If you hurt yourself, you might feel like no-one else will understand how you are feeling. This can make it difficult to know how to cope with self-harm. There are several ways that you can manage the way you feel, depending on whether you want to self-harm now, or are looking at ways to break the cycle longer term.



### Managing the urge

If you have decided that you want to stop self-harming, it can be hard to overcome the urge to hurt yourself when it occurs. Some people find that the best way to manage this is to find a good distraction that takes your mind away from wanting to hurt yourself, so that the urge can pass. It can take some time to get used to distracting yourself, but you may find that the more you practice, the easier it becomes to resist the urge.

Finding the right distraction may depend on how you are feeling at the time.

If you **feel sad**, you could try:

- Practising relaxation strategies including breathing exercises
- Following a guided mindfulness session on a mindfulness app
- Talking to someone else about how you feel
- Letting yourself cry
- Making yourself feel safe or more relaxed by getting into bed, wrapping up in a blanket, or having a warm bath.

If you **feel angry**, you could try:

- Shouting or hitting a pillow
- Going for a run or another form of exercise
- Stamping on a cardboard box until it breaks
- Listening to loud music.

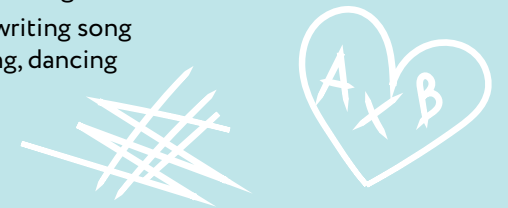


If you **want to punish** yourself, you could try:

- Exercising or punching a pillow
- Writing a list of positive things about yourself, such as how well you have done so far to manage how you have been feeling
- Expressing yourself through writing song lyrics, poetry, drawing, painting, dancing or singing.

If you **feel numb** or empty, you could try:

- Having a cold shower
- Holding ice cubes or rubbing them against your wrists.



### Try to wait

It can be hard to distract yourself from self-harm, but you may find it easier if you tell yourself that you only need to delay hurting yourself, rather than not hurt yourself at all. At first, aim to delay hurting yourself by one minute. Once you can do this, you can start to increase the delay period to three minutes, then five minutes, and so on.

In those who self-harm infrequently, this method of delaying may provide enough time for the urge to pass. However, for those who have self-harmed for a long time, or hurt themselves frequently, the delay is unlikely to prevent self-harm. In this situation, emotional support and the desire to break the pattern is required.

### Breaking the patterns

If you self-harm, it is helpful to understand why you hurt yourself, and how you feel before and afterwards. This helps you to recognise the triggers that may lead you to self-harm, so that you become more aware of your patterns of hurting yourself. Triggers might include sensations such as a sound or smell, particular dates or anniversaries, people, locations or thoughts. If you can work out what your triggers are,



you may be able to make changes that could help you to manage how you feel in future. If a trigger is unavoidable, such as a date, recognising it can still help you to think about what you can do to manage that date or anniversary.

To recognise your own triggers, you will need to consider if something happened just before you had the urge to self-harm. This could be hearing a particular sound, or visiting a specific location that is difficult for you. Writing in a diary can be helpful for working out if there is a pattern to your urge to self-harm.

## Consider talking to friends or family

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## Seek professional help and advice

If you self-harm, it is likely that you are experiencing some distress as a result of a traumatic experience, or due to anxiety, depression or another mental health issue.

You should seek advice from your doctor, mental health services, or a trained counsellor to begin managing your self-harm. You may be offered specialist support to address the distress that you feel. A doctor may also suggest trialling a course of medication to help treat any underlying mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety.

Even if you find it difficult to talk to others about hurting yourself, it is important to seek confidential, expert advice to begin addressing the distress you are feeling.



## Give yourself time and patience

It can be hard to distract yourself from self-harm, but you may find it easier if you tell yourself that you only need to delay hurting yourself, rather than not hurt yourself at all. At first, aim to delay hurting yourself by one minute. Once you can do this, you can start to increase the delay period to three minutes, then five minutes, and so on.

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## I have a friend who might be self-harming. What can I do to help them?

It can be upsetting to find out that a friend hurts themselves. There are some things that you may feel able to do to support them, but it is important that you know that you are not wholly responsible for stopping them self-harming.

You may be able to support a friend by:

- Telling them that you are there for them, and that you do not judge them or think less of them because they have self-harmed
- Checking if there is anything they would like you to do for them, such as meeting them for a walk or talking on the phone when they are feeling upset
- Asking if they would like to talk about how they feel
- Encouraging them to speak to their parents, a teacher, or a doctor for advice.

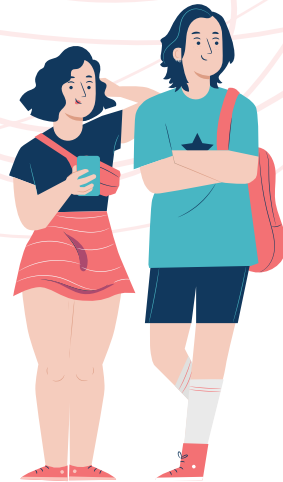
You are not to blame if a friend hurts themselves, and you may need to seek some advice or support to manage your own feelings around it, too.



# I think my child might be self-harming, what are the signs?

You may have noticed that your child's mood or behaviour seems to have changed. This could be a sign that they are feeling upset, anxious or distressed. If you notice unexplained cuts, bruises or burns, or that they appear to be hiding their arms or legs, you may have concerns that they are hurting themselves. Some parents also find evidence of self-harm, such as blades or bloody tissues.

You may notice a change in your child's eating pattern, including over- or under-eating, or that they are exercising excessively. Missing tablets, or more tablets being taken than usual, may also alert you to the possibility that your child could be self-harming.



# What should I do if my child is self-harming?

It can be devastating to find out that your child is self-harming. You may feel angry, sad, terrified, frustrated and many other emotions. Try to avoid being critical or angry, as your child will need you to support them in a calm manner.

Self-harm is rarely a form of attention seeking, and so it is important to recognise that your child is trying to express an emotion or manage the way they are feeling. Validating how your child feels can therefore be incredibly helpful. Telling them that you are there to support them, or that you know they have a lot to deal with, may help them to be more open with you. They may value you listening to them without interrupting.

You do not need to manage your child's self-harm alone. Many teenagers benefit from speaking to a specialist counsellor or visiting their doctor for an informal assessment of their mental health. If your child is reluctant to talk to someone else about it, you may be able to reassure them by telling them that you support them, but that others will be able to offer the best advice to help them manage their feelings and distress.

If you have serious concerns about the health of your child, seek medical advice straight away, or call 999 or 112 in an emergency.

# Help and Assistance

If you are concerned about yourself, friends or family you should contact your GP or Out of Hours Service immediately.

You can also get immediate support and information 24/7 by

 **FreeText HELP to 50015**

Texting 50015 is free of charge from any network and you can text this number even if you have no credit. This service is fully confidential and YSPI has no information on mobile numbers that use the FreeText service



For information on:

- [Emergency Contacts](#)
- [National Helplines](#)
- [Local Support Groups](#)
- [Directions to your nearest GP or out of hours clinic](#)
- [Directions to your nearest safe place or refuge](#)

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