

Talking about Self harm

A mini-guide to support anyone affected by self harm in West Sussex.

Understanding self harm

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Websites and local support

This mini-guide was originally researched and written by volunteers from award-winning youth project **Right Here Brighton and Hove** and has been adapted for use by anyone affected by self-harm in West Sussex.

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Understanding self harm

It can be a very lonely place to be in when you're self harming, but it is **more common than you may realise**.

A lot of people think self harm is either cutting and/or overdosing but a lot of things done in excess could be seen as self harm. **Examples** of these are: getting drunk, doing drugs, smoking, getting into fights and getting tattoos or piercings. There are also less obvious things such as rubbing skin, digging your nails into yourself or pinching yourself.

If you're concerned that any of the above applies to you, a friend or family member, **please don't panic!**

Self harm can be a strategy people use to **cope with what's going on in their life**. Self harm is especially common in young people which may be as a result of so much change going on physically / hormonally as well as all other changes young people are having to face.

When young people self harm it is **usually a sign that they are having a tough time and need support**. There are lots of services that can help (see our [Local Support Services](#) section.) Services won't force you to stop, but they will encourage and support you.

Tips for friends and family:

- Rather than trying to come up with a solution, it's more likely that they'll want you to **listen and support them** by letting them know it's okay to feel what they're feeling. Find more tips in our [Communicating](#) section.
- Focus on what's causing them to self harm rather than the self harm in itself, unless immediate medical attention is required: **How are they feeling? What's going on for them at the moment? Have there been any major changes in their life recently?**
- Trying to force someone to stop self harming can make them feel worse, as it can increase the emotions they're already trying to cope with and reduce their feeling of control.
- If they do want to stop self harming, we've included some suggestions in our [Ideas to Help](#) section.

Why do people self harm?

Everyone has problems during their life, and self harm can affect **anyone**.

Self harm may be used as a **coping mechanism**, and it is **a myth that self harm is always a sign of suicidal behaviour**.

Some underlying issues can lead to young people harming themselves. We call these **triggers**, and have listed some below.

If you combine any of these triggers with the change that is going on both physically and hormonally for young people, it's not surprising that it can be a difficult time.

- Struggling with **difficult thoughts, feelings and emotions**, or maybe feeling overwhelmed
- Problems with **family, friends or relationships**
- **Stress** (specifically exams and academic achievement)
- **Abuse** (emotional, physical, sexual or neglect)
- Being **bullied** (many different types including cyber bullying)
- **Self image** issues

When someone is struggling to cope or tell somehow else how they are feeling, self harm can be a way of dealing with - and expressing - difficult feelings.

For some people, it can lead to a **sense of control or emotional release**.

Some young people may not understand or know why they self harm, and that's okay. It's still important to get help.

There are many reasons why people self harm. Other people's lives may look picture perfect from the outside, but here are just a few people that self harmed when they were younger that might surprise you:

Angelina Jolie
Colin Farrell
Demi Lovato
Johnny Depp
Megan Fox
Nicole Scherzinger
Princess Diana

Communicating about self harm

If you are self harming...

...you might feel lonely, isolated and like you can't tell anyone about it - but **you are not alone**.

Some people perceive self harm as "attention seeking" behaviour, but it's clear that in most cases this is not true at all and most people feel they have to hide it. We really want to encourage you to talk about it and more importantly about how you're feeling.

This could be anonymously through services such as the **Samaritans** and **Tess** (find their details in our [Websites and Phonelines](#) section) or having a chat with a friend, family member, staff at school, college or university, GP, youth worker, or counsellor.

It's understandable that talking to someone might feel difficult (maybe even impossible) to start with. Sometimes writing, drawing or painting how you're feeling can help too. We're not saying it will fix everything, but usually it can really help to get it out - it can help you realise what's going on inside your head and how you're feeling, as well as helping others to understand why you may be behaving differently.

Here are a few ideas that might help you to start a conversation about how you're feeling or your self harm:

- **I'm finding (...) really hard right now.**
- **Can we have a chat about (...)**
- **I've been doing (...) to myself and I don't know why.**
- **If you've got a moment I could really do with a chat.**
- **Can I talk to you in private please?**

Self harm is a form of communication in itself

Self harm can be a way of expressing how you're feeling, whether this is intentional or not. It's not easy to talk about 'how you're feeling', 'what you're thinking' and 'what's going on for you'. This can lead to trying to find a way to cope with these things on your own. It can be very difficult to find the "right" words or words that can make/help people understand how you're actually feeling inside.

When talking to others about their self harm...

...it's helpful to be aware that self harm is likely to be a coping mechanism they've developed to help cope with and manage emotions. Check out [Keeping Yourself Safe](#) to encourage them to do this in the safest way possible.

We understand it's not an easy subject to broach but it's so important to give people a chance to talk about what they're doing - and more importantly **why** they're doing it.

It's really key to **listen, take them seriously**, and be as **open-minded** and as **non-judgemental** as possible whilst someone is disclosing their self harm to you or talking about their feelings or what's going on for them.

Probably the **key thing** to focus on (as long as they don't need immediate medical attention) is **why they're self harming**.

Phrases like this might help you to start the conversation:

- **I've noticed that recently you don't quite seem yourself, is there anything you'd like to talk about?**
- **Is there anything I can do to help?**
- **I can see that you've got/done (...) and I'm concerned about how you are.**
- **Are you being safe in your self harming?**

"Some people do it for attention... that doesn't mean they should be ignored. There are plenty of ways to get attention, why cause yourself pain? And if someone's crying for help, you should give them it, not stand there and judge the way they're asking for it."

Camelot Foundation & The Mental Health Foundation.
The Truth About Self harm: For Young People and their Friends and Family, 2006

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