No Harm Done

Things Can Change

Information and help for young people worried about self-harm
A MESSAGE OF HOPE

So why are you here? You might be self-harming, maybe you’ve thought about it, maybe you have a friend who is self-harming or perhaps you just want to know more.

I got involved with this project alongside other young people who have ‘been there’ with self-harm. It is scary and isolating and it often feels like there is no way out.

The aim of ‘No Harm Done’ is to reassure those affected by self-harm that things can and do improve – it can be hard work (and it might feel worse before it gets better) but coming out or the other side is so worth it, YOU are so worth it.

There are people that care about you and they can help you to get to where you want to be.

Lucy, 18
COMMON QUESTIONS

What is self-harm?
Causing damage to your body, often as a result of distressing or difficult feelings.

Why do people self-harm?
Some young people report self-harming as a result of feeling overwhelmed, stressed, numb or disconnected. Others say something in their environment makes them feel vulnerable. Everybody’s experience is different.

Am I going crazy?
No, self-harm is a lot more common than you think, it can affect anyone, you are not alone and help is available.

What can I do to stop self-harming?
Most young people find that it helps to be able to talk to someone they trust about what they are going through.

Who can help me?
People who care about you can offer the support you need, that includes parents, carers, family, friends, teachers, school nurses, doctors and youth workers.

Why do teachers have to tell someone else?
Teachers want the best for young people and have a duty to ensure you get the help you need, that sometimes means telling someone else in the school or at home.
SOME ADVICE FROM OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE

Things can change. There are things that will make things better, you just have to look for them. And if one thing doesn’t work, that doesn’t mean you should give up or you’re not worth it. It means there are other options that you haven’t yet explored.

When you are self-harming it can be a really scary time - REMEMBER you do deserve to get better and you have the right to help.

Be kind to yourself.

Spend time with people who care about you, such as friends and family.

Find someone you trust to talk to, this is nearly always the first step to feeling better and getting the help you need.
If you have caused yourself serious bodily harm, or feel like you are going to, call or visit your local Accident and Emergency immediately.
No Harm Done
A Parent’s Journey

Next steps for parents or carers whose child is self-harming
"Having found out my child was self-harming, I was so devastated and confused as to why. My emotions were all over the place, not knowing how to help her, where to go for professional help - it was so stressful. As a father I just wanted to wrap her up in cotton wool.

Back then I didn’t know there were groups and services that could or would help her. But I did know it was hugely important to let my daughter know she was not alone. We, her family, were all here for her, to help her get better, support her through the darkest of times and help her feel safe.

I hope sharing our family’s experience through this project, will go some way to helping other parents dealing with self-harm.”

Trevor, a parent
I FEEL GUILTY

If you’ve recently discovered that your child is harming themselves then you’re probably experiencing a whole range of emotions. Parents commonly talk of guilt, shame, anger, frustration, sadness and disgust.

"I felt I had failed as a parent. Every cut felt like confirmation of what a bad job I must be doing."

Self-harm is a common coping mechanism for young people who turn to it as quickly as other generations might have used drugs or alcohol to manage difficult feelings. It can be a reflection of a broad range of issues, most of which are unrelated to our parenting.

However, as a parent you’re in a great position to support your child’s recovery. Acknowledge your feelings, perhaps by talking to a partner, friend or counsellor. Try not to focus on the past, instead think about how you can help make things change. Many parents grow closer to their children as they support their recovery.

"I couldn’t have got through it without my Dad. He was so accepting and practical."

"Looking back, that time feels like a gift; we went from strangers to friends – we built a bridge of trust."
I’M WORRIED I’LL SAY THE WRONG THING

Many parents find themselves paralysed with fear of saying the wrong thing to their child and so they say nothing at all. One time you should say nothing is if your emotions are running high – then it’s best to give yourself space and time to calm. The rest of the time, even if you don’t get it quite right, each conversation is a show of support for your child. Young people shared their tips with us on how parents can get it right:

Try not to judge: My parents didn’t like it but they didn’t think it made me a bad person.

Be honest: My parents told me they didn’t get it–nor did I. Their honesty and questions helped me to open up about it.

Accept recovery as a process: I can’t stop. Not right now. If you ask me to, I’ll feel like I’m letting you down. It’s going to take time.

Listen: My dad said very little. He just listened. It was exactly what I needed.

Talk about other things too: I’m more than my self-harm. It doesn’t have to be the focus of every conversation.

“She often said the wrong things and she didn’t understand at first, but she was there and she cared. That was the most important thing.”
WHAT SHOULD I DO NEXT?

There are many practical ways in which you can support your child’s recovery. The journey is different for everyone, but things that can commonly help include:

**Supporting your child in accessing professional support**
A visit to the GP or talking to someone at school is often the best first step.

**Learning more about self-harm**
There is a lot of misunderstanding around self-harm, the better you understand it, the better you can support your child. Further sources of support can be found here.

**Identifying stressors and triggers**
Talk through a typical day or upcoming events with your child. Identify situations that are worrying them and discuss how to best address these.

**Helping your child learn about alternatives**
Work with your child to identify different ways of dealing with difficult emotions such as breathing exercises, music, physical activity, writing or art.

**Keep supporting**
As things get better and scars heal, we might begin to drift away. Try not to, this early recovery phase is sometimes the hardest part of all.
“I found talking to a counsellor really helpful. I needed somewhere safe to say all the things I felt too scared to say elsewhere.”

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SUPPORTING YOURSELF

It’s important that you look after yourself and the rest of the family as well as the child who is self-harming. If we’re not physically and emotionally well then we’re not in a good position to support those we care about.

“Just basic stuff like eating well, sleeping enough and getting some exercise make a big difference. Those things slip really fast and as they slip so does your ability to cope.”

“We set aside time to let our hair down with our other son – he needs our attention and support too. This is stressful for him, he’s very vulnerable. Besides, he deserves a little fun!”

“Sometimes you have to do something just for you. Have a bath, go for a walk, have a meal out. You’ll come back refreshed and better able to manage.”
**FURTHER SUPPORT**

YoungMinds: [youngminds.org.uk](http://youngminds.org.uk)  
**Parents Helpline** 0808 802 5544  
(Monday to Friday 9.30am – 4pm)

Coping with self-harm: [a guide for parents and carers](http://copingwithselfharm.co.uk)  
(University of Oxford in conjunction with YoungMinds and The Royal College of Psychiatrists)

**Factsheet from The Royal College of Psychiatrists**  

A Short Introduction to Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People Who Self-Harm by Professor Carol Fitzpatrick. Available as a [paperback](http://shop.rcpsych.org.uk) or [Kindle](http://kindle.amazon.com)

**Self-Harm Alternatives**: over 130 ideas for use in recovery suggested by young people, collated by Dr Pooky Knightsmith

**No Harm Done**  - film & resource pack for young people  
**No Harm Done**  - film & resource pack for professionals

“If I could go back in time, I wouldn’t change it. It was really hard but it brought my parents and I closer together and it helped me learn ways to talk and to cope that I will use for the rest of my life.”
No Harm Done

Recognising and responding to self-harm

Next steps for staff working with young people
INTRODUCTION

Self-harm describes any way in which a young person might harm themselves or put themselves at risk in order to cope with difficult thoughts, feelings or experiences. It affects up to 1 in 5 young people and spans the divides of gender, class, age and ethnicity. As such, many people find themselves in the position of wanting to support a young person who is self-harming. This can be difficult due to lack of confidence or uncertainty about what to say or do. Here we’ve provided simple guidance for taking those first steps – your support can be lifechanging.

“I was so alone and lost and desperate. I thought no one cared until my youth worker encouraged me to open up. I remember that day so vividly – it was the first day of the rest of my life.”
SELF-HARM WARNING SIGNS

There are many signs you can look out for which indicate a young person is in distress and may be harming themselves, or at risk of self-harm, the most obvious being physical injuries which:

- you observe on more than one occasion
- appear too neat or ordered to be accidental
- do not appear consistent with how the young person says they were sustained

Other warning signs include:

- secrecy or disappearing at times of high emotion
- long or baggy clothing covering arms or legs even in warm weather
- increasing isolation or unwillingness to engage
- avoiding changing in front of others (may avoid PE, shopping, sleepovers)
- absence or lateness
- general low mood or irritability
- negative self-talk – feeling worthless, hopeless or aimless

“At first we thought he was just accident prone, it was easy to miss, he always had an explanation as to how he’d got hurt.”
THE FIRST CONVERSATION

The sooner we encourage a young person to disclose their self-harm, the sooner we are able to provide or seek appropriate support to help them break the cycle. We can do so by passing our concerns on to a safeguarding officer or by providing a safe space for the young person to talk to us.

The most supportive first conversation is one where:

- the young person is the sole focus of your attention
- you spend most of your time listening, not talking
- the young person tells their story, you never guess or assume
- there is a feeling of acceptance and support, not judgement
- self-harm is not dismissed as attention seeking
- unrealistic promises are not made about confidentiality
- this is recognised as the first step of a difficult journey
- clear next steps are identified and followed up promptly
- you recognise how hard this conversation must be for the young person
- you respond calmly – even if you don’t feel calm

“It was the hardest conversation of my life, but every word I spoke made the load feel a little lighter and for the first time in a long time, I felt hope.”

“I’m not looking for attention, it’s just the only thing that helps me control the way I feel.”
WHEN A YOUNG PERSON ISN’T READY TO TALK

When a young person is more reluctant to disclose or discuss their self-harm, three important questions to consider are:

1. Who is the best person to have this conversation? You can use your knowledge of the young person, or ask them who they feel comfortable talking to.

2. How can you help the conversation flow? An informal environment or talking whilst carrying out another activity such as walking or drawing can really help.

3. Would another medium work better? Some young people feel happier talking via instant messenger, text or email – be creative and use your knowledge of the child.

“I tried several times to talk to him to no avail; it was only when I texted him that the conversation finally started.”

If a young person still isn’t ready to open up, provide them with details of anonymous sources of support and regularly revisit the situation.

“The childline counsellor helped me get more comfortable talking about things and next time my teacher tried to talk to me, I felt ready.”
“He didn’t want to show me his wounds but he was happy to have the school nurse assess and dress them as long as I told her not to ask any questions.”

NEXT STEPS

If you have any concerns about a young person’s immediate safety, this is an absolute priority and should be treated as an urgent safeguarding issue in line with your policies. If you think a young person is at risk, they should not be left alone.

All discussions should be recorded and shared with your safeguarding officer who will keep these details on file and can provide support and direction on appropriate next steps. These might include:

- Informing adults who need to know in order to keep the young person safe. This will usually include parents or carers.
- Visiting the GP to seek further support and guidance.
- Providing access to a school counsellor.
- Setting up regular meetings with a trusted adult such as a form tutor who can provide practical support and guidance.

It is important that all wounds are appropriately dressed and cared for as infection is common. Provide the young person with information about wound care or access to a trained first aider or medical professional who can assess and dress any wounds.
PROVIDING PRACTICAL SUPPORT

If you find yourself in the position of providing regular support to a young person, here are some helpful things you can do:

**Listen** – provide a safe space for non-judgmental, supportive listening. Even a few minutes of high quality listening can make a huge difference to how supported a young person feels.

**Address stressors** – work with the young person to understand their triggers and stressors. Working through a typical day and highlighting the tough bits can be a great way to start and then think creatively of ways you might address these.

**Make a self-soothe box** – work with the young person to collect a range of different things they can use to distract or soothe themselves when they feel the urge to self-harm. This might include music, colouring, books, bubbles, photographs or inspirational quotes.

**Provide safe sources of further information** – highlight sources of further information such as those in the young people's digital pack for 'No Harm Done'.

*Safeguarding you own wellbeing* – It can be emotionally challenging to support a young person who is self-harming so it’s important that you too receive regular support and confidential listening. Keep in regular contact with your safeguarding officer and if, for any reason, you feel you are unable to continue to support the young person, discuss this at the earliest opportunity.

“Things changed for me at home and I felt unable to provide the level of support she deserved. I was honest with her and we identified a different adult she could regularly speak to.”
WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Whilst there is much that proactive, supportive individuals can do to help a young person within their school or organisation, this support is best provided within the context of a whole school approach in order to keep both ourselves, and the young person as safe as possible. Simple steps that your school could take include:

1. Developing and implementing a mental health policy
Clear guidance can give staff the knowledge and confidence they need to respond to issues appropriately. It is important to develop a policy that feels relevant and achievable within your setting and to ensure that all staff know who to refer to with concerns.

2. Providing training for all staff
Providing basic training for all staff on how to recognise and respond to self-harm will increase the confidence of both staff and students in making and responding to disclosures. Funded training can be provided by the Charlie Waller Memorial Trust and YoungMinds regularly runs self-harm training as part of its Open Access programme.

3. Addressing self-harm as part of PSHE
Your PSHE curriculum can provide a great opportunity to tackle myths and misunderstandings surrounding self-harm and to provide students with an understanding of how to keep themselves and each other supported and safe. The PSHE Association guidance on teaching about mental health provides background information about how to tackle sensitive issues safely as well as model lessons on self-harm and healthy coping.

4. Looking after staff wellbeing
Before we can look after others, we must first look after ourselves. Supporting young people who are in emotional distress can be physically and mentally draining for staff; this needs to be recognised and appropriate support put in place, both in terms of training and supportive listening.

“Most importantly, the INSET day got us talking about self-harm. It was uncomfortable at first but we all grew in confidence throughout the day. It was really empowering – we’re no longer scared of disclosures, we feel confident we can help.”
“There’s no denying that it’s a gruelling journey and there are downs as well as ups; but once you’re out the other side and you see a happy, healthy young person ready to head out into the world it is the best feeling ever.”

FURTHER INFORMATION

YoungMinds: youngminds.org.uk
Parents Helpline 0808 802 5544
(Monday to Friday 9.30am – 4pm)

YoungMinds provides information and free resources to help implement a whole school approach and self-harm, mental health and resilience training for professionals. Charlie Waller Memorial Trust provides free self-harm training to staff working with young people.

Factsheet from The Royal College of Psychiatrists
Childline: childline.org.uk 0800 1111 (24hr)

Samaritans: samaritans.org.uk
Helpline (24 hr): 08457 90 90 90 UK & NI
Email: jo@samaritans.org

The Site: thesite.org

Self–Harm Alternatives: over 130 ideas for use in recovery suggested by young people, collated by Dr Pooky Knightsmith


A Short Introduction to Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People Who Self–Harm by Professor Carol Fitzpatrick. Available as a paperback or Kindle

No Harm Done: ﬁlm & resource pack for parents
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THANK YOU

Thank you to all the young people, parents and professionals that so generously gave their time and shared their experiences to make ‘No Harm Done’ a reality.

These packs were co-created with young people, parents and professionals, and produced by:

YOUNGMINDS
The voice for young people’s mental health and wellbeing

RC PSYCH
ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS

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