

# Online Resources for People Who Self-Harm and Those Involved in Their Informal and Formal Care: Observational Study with Content Analysis

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## Introduction

- Self-harm is a prevalent issue in the UK, representing 100,000 acute hospital admissions per year<sup>1</sup>
- There are fears that the internet may encourage or normalise self-harm, particularly among young people<sup>2</sup>
- The internet has potential to be helpful for self-harm; most people who self-harm use the web for constructive reasons such as to find information or to participate in forums<sup>3</sup>
- Guidance for clinicians regarding which aspects of the internet they should discuss with patients is not readily available

## Aims

1. To investigate and describe, using systematic methods, the resources currently available on the internet for people who self-harm, their friends or families
2. To summarise the online advice using undertaking qualitative analysis to generate a thematic map
3. To provide a starting point for clinicians wishing to provide guidance for patients about internet help resources for self-harm

## Methods

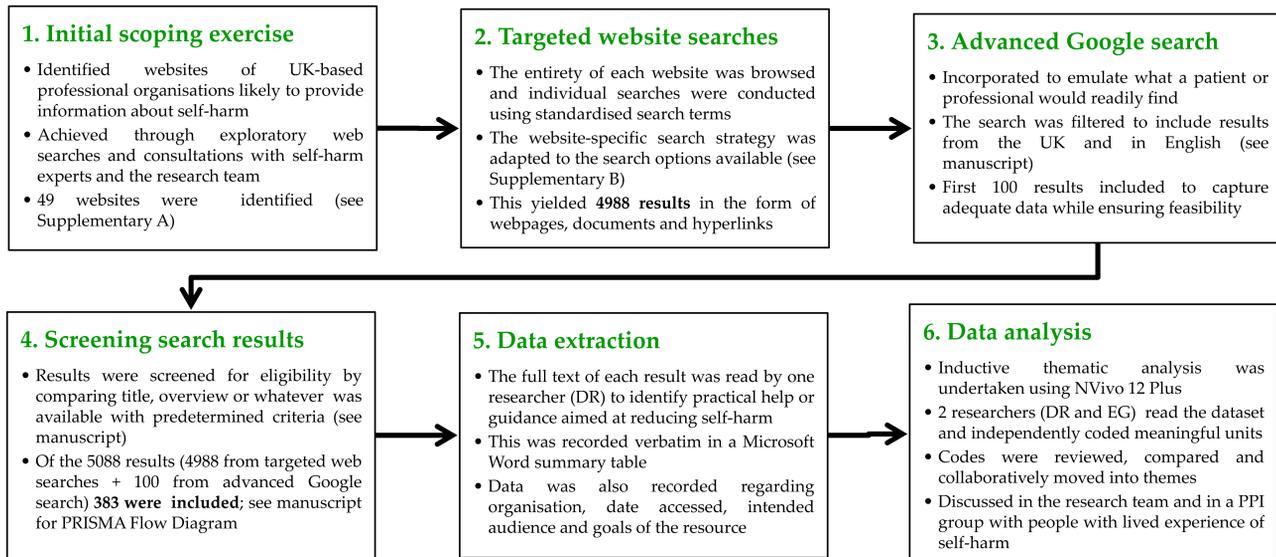


Figure 1. Thematic map of guidance on what is helpful for self-harm.

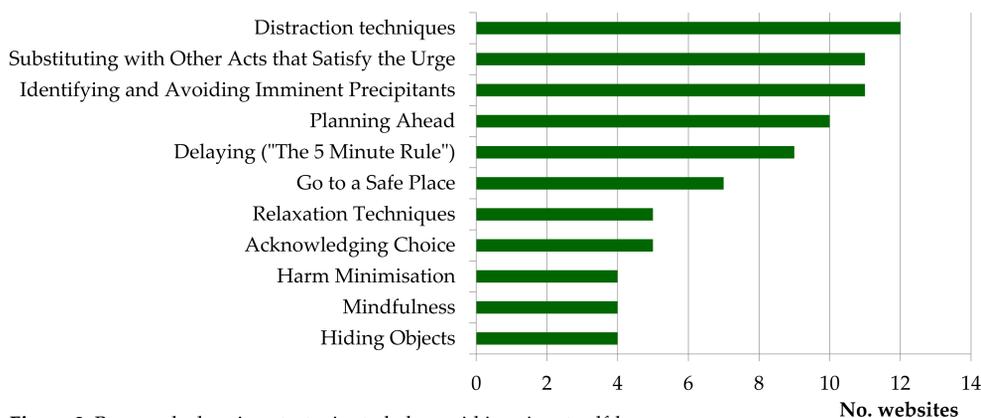
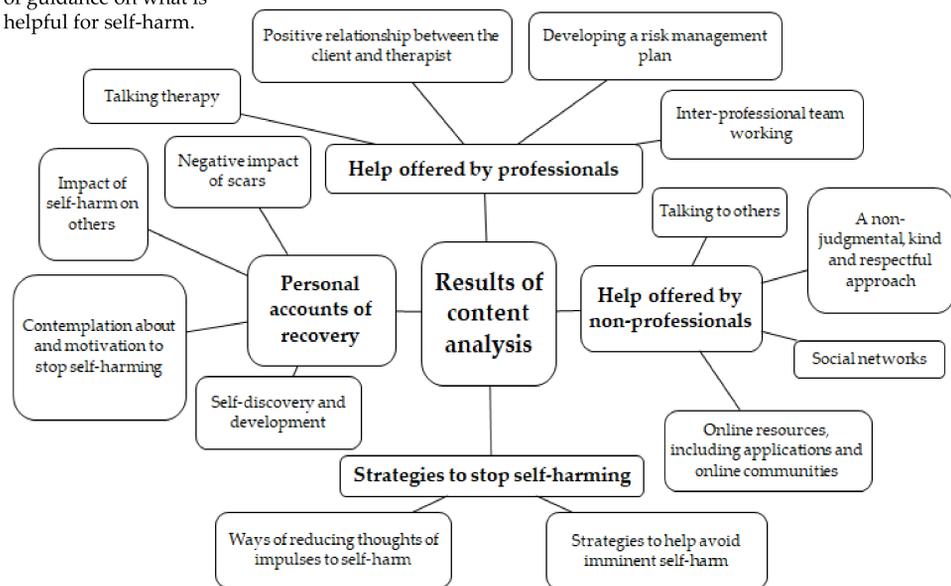


Figure 2. Bar graph showing strategies to help avoid imminent self-harm.

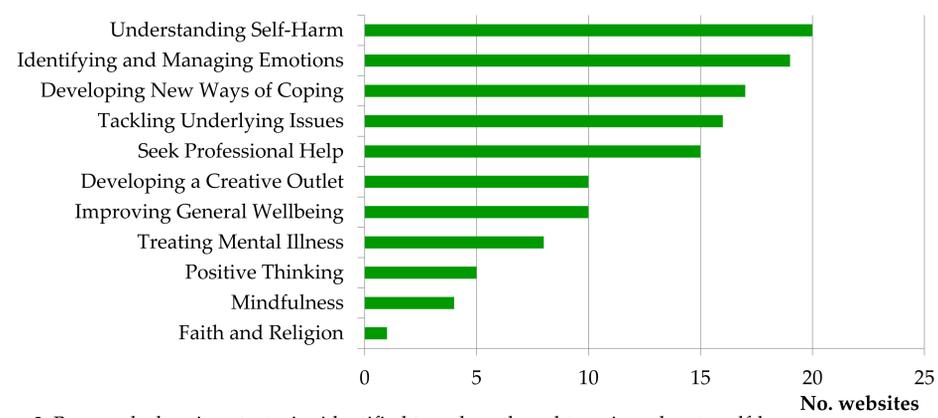


Figure 3. Bar graph showing strategies identified to reduce thoughts or impulses to self-harm.

## Results

Three sites – **LifeSIGNS**, **Self Injury Support Network** and **The Mix** - provided over thirty relevant webpages with detailed, practical advice to help people stop self-harming or cope better. **SelfHarmUK**, **Recover Your Life**, **Young Minds** and **Mind** also provided direct advice to the reader.

Brief professional advice was offered by **World Health Organisation (WHO)**, **National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)**, **Royal College of Psychiatrists**, **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**, **British Psychological Society (BPS)** and **Public Health England (PHE)**.

Some websites offered specific advice to people at imminent risk of self-harm, while others gave general advice on ways to reduce the likelihood of experiencing thoughts of self-harm. The strategies and frequency of their recommendation are displayed in Figures 2 and 3.

We found websites that focused on specific guidance for:

- **Prisoners who self-harm;** specific interventions were recommended, including an Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) plan and the Listener scheme
- **People with autism and special education needs;** recommendations included recording a behaviour diary and antipsychotics in particular circumstances
- **Young people;** the advice for this group included limiting access to smart devices and involving schools and other youth organisations

## Discussion

- We found most information focused on self-cutting, with little help on self-poisoning
- The most practical guidance was limited to a small number of non-statutory sites
- Strengths of this study include the dual independent coding and discussions of the analyses in a multidisciplinary workshop with people with lived experience of self-harm
- Our searches were limited to websites of UK bodies, but self-harm is a worldwide problem and health organisations and guidance will inevitably vary between countries
- We did not explore the information provided in chat rooms or closed websites requiring a membership as we sought to identify freely available information
- Multiple studies have found that access to internet content related to suicide and self-harm is common among people who self-harm; it is important that clinicians are aware of this and feel comfortable discussing internet use with the people they are helping
- We suggest that clinical trials to evaluate psychosocial interventions for self-harm should record the nature of internet use by trial participants

## Conclusions

- We applied systematic search methods to the vast grey online literature available to people who self-harm and clinicians
- Our findings represent a summary of the help, guidance and recommendations available online aimed at reducing self-harm
- The Royal College of Psychiatrists guidance to clinicians emphasises the need to enquire about internet use in clinical assessments of people at risk of self-harm; our findings represent a starting point for those wishing to discuss helpful online resources
- Websites change over time and the internet is in constant flux, so websites would need to be reviewed before making recommendations

### References:

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