

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when you hurt yourself as a way of dealing with very difficult feelings, painful memories or overwhelming situations and experiences. Some people have described self-harm as a way to:

- express something that is hard to put into words
- turn invisible thoughts or feelings into something visible
- change emotional pain into physical pain
- reduce overwhelming emotional feelings or thoughts
- have a sense of being in control
- escape traumatic memories
- have something in life that they can rely on
- punish themselves for their feelings and experiences
- stop feeling numb, disconnected or dissociated (see [dissociation and dissociative disorders](#))
- create a reason to physically care for themselves
- express [suicidal feelings](#) and thoughts without taking their own life.

After self-harming you may feel a short-term sense of release, but the cause of your distress is unlikely to have gone away. Self-harm can also bring up very difficult emotions and could make you feel worse.

Even though there are always reasons underneath someone hurting themselves, it is important to know that self-harm does carry risks. Once you have started to depend on self-harm, it can take a long time to stop.

My body comes with a trigger warning

"I didn't know how else to cope. I didn't like myself."

[Read Seaneen's story](#)

How do people self-harm?

There are lots of different forms of self-harming. Some people use the same one all the time, other people hurt themselves in different ways at different times.

Warning: it can be upsetting and potentially triggering to read information about how to self-harm. If you are feeling vulnerable at the moment, you might not want to read the information below.

Ways people self-harm can include:

- cutting yourself
- poisoning yourself
- [over-eating or under-eating](#)
- exercising excessively

- biting yourself
- picking or scratching at your skin
- burning your skin
- inserting objects into your body
- hitting yourself or walls
- misusing alcohol, prescription and [recreational drugs](#)
- pulling your hair
- having unsafe sex
- getting into fights where you know you will get hurt.

If you self-harm, it is important that you know how to look after your injuries and that you have access to the first aid equipment you need. [LifeSIGNS](#) has information on first aid for self-injury and self-harm.

If you're concerned about an injury or not sure how to look after it, see [your GP](#).

"I think one of my biggest barriers to getting help was actually not admitting to myself that I had a problem. I used to tell myself, 'I'm only scratching, it's not real self-harm.'"

Why do people harm themselves?

There are no fixed rules about why people self-harm. It really can be very different for everyone.

For some people, self-harm is linked to specific experiences and is a way of dealing with something that's either happening at the moment or which happened in the past. For others, the reasons are less clear and can be harder to make sense of.

Sometimes you might not know why you hurt yourself. If you don't understand the reasons for your self-harm, you are not alone and you can still get help.

"I started self-harming when I was 15 or 16. I can't remember why I decided to start, but that's what I did."

Any difficult experience can cause someone to self-harm. Common reasons include:

- pressures at school or work
- bullying
- [money worries](#)
- [sexual, physical or emotional abuse](#)
- [bereavement](#)
- homophobia, biphobia and transphobia (see [LGBTIQ+ mental health](#))
- breakdown of a relationship
- loss of a job
- an illness or health problem
- low [self-esteem](#)
- an increase in [stress](#)
- difficult feelings, such as [depression](#), [anxiety](#), [anger](#) or numbness.

"Self-harm proved to me I was real, I was alive. At times it also silenced the chaos in my head, briefly pausing the repetitive flashbacks and body memories."

Some people self-harm particular areas of their body that are linked to an earlier trauma. For more information, see our information on [trauma](#).

Some people find that certain actions, such as drinking alcohol or taking drugs, increase the likelihood of self-harm, or that self-harm is more likely to happen at certain times (at night, for example).

Sometimes people talk about self-harm as attention-seeking. If people make comments like this, it can leave you feeling judged and alone. In reality, a lot of people keep their self-harm private, and it can be painful to have your behaviour misunderstood in this way.

However, if you do self-harm as a way of bringing attention to yourself, remember that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be noticed and to have your distress acknowledged and taken seriously. You also deserve a sympathetic response from those around you, including medical professionals.

"I've learnt that, as my emotional needs were not being met, I used self-harm because I didn't know how to express myself or say what I needed or wanted. A part was also for attention, I was desperate for someone to notice me and help me."

Who self-harms?

People of all ages and backgrounds self-harm. There is no one typical person who hurts themselves.

While self-harm can affect anyone, difficult experiences that can result in self-harm relate more to some people than others. Exam stress, classroom bullying and peer pressure is something that affects [young people](#), for example. Experiencing stigma and discrimination based on your sexual orientation or gender identity is more common for members of the [LGBTIQ+ community](#). [Money worries](#) can create greater stress for those on a lower income. These specific pressures can lead to increased tension which may in turn make self-harm more likely.

"Everyone is individual – there is no specific type of person who self-harms. The journey is unique, as is the road to recovery."

How can I help myself now?

During intense urges to hurt yourself, it can be hard to imagine that it's possible to do anything else.

But there are steps you can take to help you make other choices over time.

"I've learnt that you can't rely on other people or things to save you from self-harm – it has to come from you."

Understanding your patterns of self-harm

Understanding your patterns of self-harm can help you to work out what gives you the urge to self-harm, and recognise when the urge is coming on. Remember, even when you are unable to resist the urge to self-harm, it is helpful to reflect afterwards on what happened. This will enable you to better understand the next time you have similar feelings.

Try breaking down your experience into the following:

Learn to recognise triggers

'Triggers' are what give you the urge to hurt yourself. They can be people, situations, anniversaries, sensations, specific thoughts or feelings.

Practise noting down what was happening just before you self-harmed:

- Did you have particular thoughts?
- Did a situation, person or object remind you of something difficult?

Become aware of the urge to self-harm

Urges can include physical sensations like:

- racing heart or feelings of heaviness
- strong emotions like sadness or anger
- a disconnection from yourself or a loss of sensation
- repetitive thoughts about harming yourself, or how you might harm yourself
- unhealthy decisions, like working too hard to avoid feelings.

Recognising your urges helps you take steps towards reducing or stopping self-harm. Try writing down what you notice about your urges, to help you spot them more quickly each time they come.

Identify distractions

Distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm is a way of giving yourself more breathing space and reducing the intensity of the urge.

It can be done when you feel the urge, or as soon as you become aware that you are hurting yourself.

"I learned distraction techniques. My favourite one was my Positivity Book, which is kind of like a scrap book filled with things which make me happy."

Keep a diary

One way to help yourself understand your self-harming behaviour is to keep a diary of what happens before, during and after each time you self-harm. It is helpful to do this over a period of time (like a month) so you can start to see patterns.

This can be quite an intense experience and can bring up difficult feelings. If you feel confident to try this on your own, make sure you do something relaxing or enjoyable afterwards.

If you find doing this distressing, you may want to ask for support from someone you trust.

Distracting yourself from the urge to self-harm

The main way people help themselves when they want to self-harm is through distraction.

Different distractions work for different people, and the same distraction won't necessarily work for you every time. For example, distracting yourself from anger feels very different to distracting yourself from fear, so it's important that you have a few different strategies to choose from.

The following are simply suggestions. See if you can write your own list of distractions that you've found helpful or that you would like to try out.

If you're feeling anger and frustration

Here are some distractions you could try:

- exercise
- hit cushions
- shout and dance
- shake
- tear something up into hundreds of pieces
- go for a run.

Expressing your anger physically, or by doing things like shouting, won't work for everyone and could intensify feelings. Try things out and continue with any that have a positive effect.

If you're feeling sadness and fear

Here are some distractions you could try:

- wrap a blanket around you
- spend time with an animal
- walk in [nature](#)
- let yourself cry or sleep
- listen to soothing music
- tell someone how you feel
- massage your hands

- lie in a comfortable position and breathe in – then breathe out slowly, making your out-breath longer than your in-breath. Repeat until you feel more relaxed. (See our pages on [relaxation](#)).

If you're feeling a need to control

Here are some distractions you could try:

- write lists
- tidy up
- declutter
- write a letter saying everything you are feeling, then tear it up
- weed a garden
- clench then relax all your muscles.

If you're feeling numb and disconnected

Here are some distractions you could try:

- flick elastic bands on your wrists
- hold ice cubes
- smell something with strong odour
- have a very cold shower.

If you're feeling shame

Here are some distractions you could try:

- stop spending time with anyone who treats you unkindly
- recognise when you are trying to be perfect and accept that making mistakes is part of being human
- remind yourself that there are reasons for how you behave – it is not because you are 'bad'.

If you're feeling self-hatred and wanting to punish yourself

Here are some distractions you could try:

- write a letter from the part of you that feels the self-hatred, then write back with as much compassion and acceptance as you can
- find creative ways to express the self-hatred, through writing songs or poetry, drawing, movement or singing
- do physical exercise (like running or going to the gym) to express the anger that is turned in on yourself.

"I hated my body and blamed it for what I'd been through, so felt it needed punishing. Learning to accept and respect [my body] was key to overcoming self-harm."