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# UNDERSTANDING SELF-HARM

## A PARENT GUIDE

Adapted from Family Lives information sheet for parents

### SELF-HARM

If you have recently found out or suspect your child may be self-harming, you may be feeling shocked, worried and at a loss about what to do to approach this. It helps to look at the meaning of self-harm as it can cover a range of things that people do to themselves in a deliberate and harmful way.

### WHY SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is about distress. It is a way of coping with strong emotions. Think about what may be triggering the situation. Is something going on at home or school that may be affecting them - a bereavement, parental separation or upsets, exam pressures, bullying? This may help you to know where to go for help.

Those who self-harm do not go on to commit suicide in the vast majority of cases - it is more a way of letting off steam, a safety valve when things get too much. A young person often feels embarrassed or ashamed about self-harming. Whenever a child or a young person is distressed in any way, the appropriate adult response is warmth, care and kindly attention.

### SELF-HARM MYTHS

There are some misconceptions surrounding the issue of self-harm. One is that people choose to self-harm and they could choose to stop. The urge to self-harm can be very hard to resist and can become addictive. To recover and move forward the young person needs to gain an understanding of their behaviour and develop coping strategies to deal with the situations and emotions that cause them to self-harm. Another myth is that self-harm is a form of attention-seeking. Think of that instead as attention needing. In fact self-harm happens mostly in private and most try to conceal their injuries. Self-harm is a repeated reaction to emotional pain and distress. It is an indication of an underlying problem.

# HELPING YOUR CHILD MANAGE SELF-HARM

Keep talking to your child, offering kindly reassurance. If you have already built up an open relationship, it may make it easier for you to approach self-harming. If your child doesn't want to talk don't pressure them. Let them know that you're there when they are ready. Encouraging them to confide in another trusted adult is an alternate option. It may help you to talk things through with someone such as a GP or school pastoral network before you approach your child. If you see evidence of self-harm suggest you take your child to the doctor and if they refuse, ask whether another relation or family friend could go with them. In a medical emergency don't hesitate to ring 999.

## WAYS OF HELPING

You may want to suggest alternative ways to help your child deal with difficult emotions. They may find it useful to start a diary and write or draw about how they feel. You can encourage them to call a friend or a helpline to talk to someone independent. Try to get your child involved in a physical hobby such as running, swimming, the gym, football etc. This can help them release tension in a different way.

Focus on increasing their confidence. Try not to always concentrate on the self-harm. Let them know what they are good at and encourage them to get involved in activities such as dance, music, sport or art. Let them know they need not be ashamed and they are not alone.

## LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF

Parenting is hard work at the best of times and you may need time and space to recharge. If the situation becomes serious you won't be able to help your child unless you are OK. Organise your own support networks so you have people to talk to. Also, access information and support from organisations such as those listed below.

If this is an ongoing situation you will need to take one step at a time and realise that there may be setbacks along the way. It is natural for this to be a slow process and it may take some time for your child to manage to overcome their difficulties.

Don't blame yourself; depression and self-harming thoughts can happen to anyone at any age. The GP or the school may be able to make the necessary referrals you need for professional help such as counselling. The first step is to make sure you all have some support and someone to talk things through with.

## RESOURCES

Young Minds Parent Information Service - free confidential phoneline; **0808 802 5544**

Family Lives free confidential helpline; **0808 800 2222**

Family Lives website; <http://familylives.org.uk>

**'The Parent's Guide to Self-harm'** by Jane Smith (Lion books)