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## Introduction

This booklet is for people who deliberately harm themselves and are unhappy about it. It is also for family and friends who may have difficulty understanding this behaviour.

People who have experience of harming themselves have contributed to the writing of this booklet.

It offers self help advice. However, anyone who self-harms should also see their GP (Family Doctor).

**“I need to feel something, to know that I exist. Burning myself allows me to be in control of my body. It sometimes seems as though it is the only way I can feel alive or in control of anything... it is something I carefully plan when things get bad...”**

**“Tension builds inside me and I get to the point when I feel I will explode. When I cut myself it all disappears, it seems like the badness goes out of me, my anger dissolves... for a while...”**

**“I hurt myself when I want to hurt others... it is better to hurt myself than them”**

**“It’s a downward spiral... small cuts lead to bigger cuts”**

These are the thoughts of people who have self-harmed. You may have had similar experiences yourself or you may have a friend or family member who self-harms. Although people rarely talk about self-harm, it is relatively common, little understood and very distressing.

This booklet aims to help you to begin to:

- Understand self-harm, what can cause it and keep it going.
- Explore ways of controlling self-harm.
- Discover other ways of getting help.

**It is important to get help if there is the risk of suicide.** If you are thinking about ending your life, get help immediately. Ring your local emergency service (call 999).

The following are some things to look for that may mean you are at risk:

- Do you think that you want to die or to kill yourself?
- Have you have planned a way to kill yourself?
- Do you feel hopeless about the future and can think of no reason to live?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions please tell someone and seek help.

## **Understanding self-harm**

### **What is self-harm?**

Many people harm themselves in some way, by smoking, drinking, working too hard or exercising too much. But for some people this self-harm is more apparent and can be quite severe.

Self-harm is sometimes known as self-injury and is where someone harms their body without wanting to die. Many people who harm themselves also have suicidal thoughts. But most feel that there is a difference between suicidal acts and acts of self-harm. They may say “I didn’t want to die, I just needed to get rid of terrible feelings”.

Some people may harm themselves many times each day. It may involve a lot of ritual. Some people may feel addicted to the self-harm behaviour. Others may only harm themselves occasionally when under emotional stress.

## **Who self-harms?**

People who self-harm may feel distressed a lot of the time. They may be stressed and very sensitive to rejection.

Self-harm is not determined by a person's race, age, education, sexual preference or social group. Research has suggested that more women than men harm themselves (men may show their feelings in other ways). It tends to begin in adolescence and may decrease or disappear in the thirties, although not always. Some people who harm themselves have been sexually, emotionally or physically abused in their early life.

## **Why do people self-harm?**

People often don't know why they harm themselves at the time. But through talking to a lot of people who harm themselves, research has allowed us to begin to understand what may be happening. You may recognise some of the following reasons. Tick any that apply to you.

### **To manage moods or feelings**

- To escape from emptiness, depression, shame, feeling spaced out or unreal.
- To relieve pent up tensions, pressure or anger.
- To feel something – to know you still exist.
- To feel in control.
- To express or stop sexual feelings.
- To forget something
- To stop myself from killing myself
- To get a thrill or an adrenalin rush

### **To fit in with beliefs or thoughts**

- To punish yourself because you feel you are 'bad'.
- To maintain negative belief "I'm flawed, worthless, weird".
- To escape from feelings of guilt.
- To cope with the expectations of others for example regarding our sexuality or regarding arranged marriage.

## **To communicate**

- To let people know how bad things are.
- To make your body show your pain.
- To express anger towards others and yourself, but on your own body.
- To obtain and maintain a response from others that you feel you wouldn't otherwise get.
- To punish others via your own body.
- To get people to listen to you.
- To feel part of a group and have an identity.

Many people who self-harm regard their behaviour as a way of surviving. It may be a means of coping with unbearable emotional pain. Their reasons for self-harm tend to be complex and may include many of those listed above. Self-harm can be very addictive and can be a difficult pattern to change. Sadly some people do kill themselves whilst self-harming. This is most common in those who take overdoses of tablets or medicines.

**Misusing medicines or tablets can be very dangerous. Even small 'overdoses' can kill.**

## **In what ways do people self-harm?**

People who self-harm may cut or burn themselves. They may pull out their hair, punch themselves, bite themselves, poison themselves, pluck at or scratch their skin. They may generally put themselves at risk. There are endless different ways of self-harming. It may be dramatic, hidden, or ritualistic. It may be permanently mutilating, and may seriously disfigure their body before they are able to gain control of it.

## How do other people react?

Carers, friends, relatives or workers may react to self-harm in various ways. Some responses may be helpful, others less so.

Typical reactions include:

<b>Feelings of others:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fear</li><li>• Anger</li><li>• Disgust</li><li>• Panic</li><li>• Worry</li><li>• Distress</li><li>• Guilt</li><li>• Helplessness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Detachment/coldness/dislike</li><li>• Confusion</li><li>• Concern</li><li>• Not caring</li><li>• Feeling criticised</li><li>• Feeling attacked</li><li>• Feeling useless</li></ul>
<b>Actions of others:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Setting rules and restrictions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stepping in to “solve” the problem</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Taking people to hospital</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Punishing</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Being extra sensitive</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Offering more support</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Withdrawing</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not talking about it</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talking too much about it</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stepping up observation</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Looking for experts</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Being over-intrusive</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Threatening to withdraw or leave</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Challenging you to self-harm “go ahead then, cut yourself”</li></ul>

Later on we will offer advice on how friends, family and workers can offer a more helpful response.





## How can I control my self-harm?

Ask yourself the following questions.

- **Do I need to change my life circumstances?**

If you are living in a situation that is emotionally or physically unsafe it will be difficult for you to stop self-harming. If you are in a violent or abusive atmosphere ask yourself why you are staying. Try to plan how you might change your situation. It may help to talk this over with someone else such as a friend, your GP, healthcare professional or a counsellor.

- **What leads me to self-harm?**

Keep a diary of your self-harm to help you understand it better. It may look something like this.

Day	What was happening?	What I thought	How I felt	What I did
Monday	John 'put me down' again when we were out with his mates	"I'm just rubbish"	Empty, gutted, afraid	Waited until we got home then 'cut' myself in the bathroom

People often find there is a clear pattern of events that leads them to harm themselves. If you know this you can begin to try and change. Think back to the last time you self-harmed and fill in the diary below.

Day	What was happening?	What I thought	How I felt	What I did

Try and keep a regular diary like this. This can be difficult and painful – it may be hard to capture your thoughts. But once you have discovered the pattern to your self-harm you can begin to try out methods to alter that pattern. Many people find that they self-harm following conflict or pain in a relationship.

## Ways to stop harming yourself

**This is a crisis list. These are immediate short-term solutions. Please tick those that you feel you might try ...**

- Try to delay the act in any way you can. Go for a run, clean the house, go to the shops.
- Find some company. Most people self-harm when alone so go to a public place, be with a good friend or a safe family member. This may prevent you from harming yourself.
- Distract yourself. Flick through a magazine, try the crossword, tidy up.
- Try the 10-minute delay tactic. Say to yourself that you will wait 10 minutes to self-harm. When the time is up, think again. Can you wait another 10 minutes?
- Do something for yourself. Eat something nice, pamper yourself, buy yourself something.
- Do something for someone else such as your friend, child or partner.
- Try relaxation and breathing exercises. Sit back comfortably in a chair or lie out on a bed. Relax all muscles in your body, beginning at the feet and working upwards. Concentrate on your breathing: breathe in for 5 seconds through your nose, hold your breath for 5 seconds, then breathe out slowly. Repeat this.
- Use other strong sensations to help distract you. Try loud music, a cold shower, a fast run, squeeze something very hard, smell strong perfume, eat hot chillies.
- Exercise. Jog, run, swim, cycle, dance, run up and down stairs.
- Call a friend or someone you trust.

- ❑ Plan something. A holiday, a night out, to do some voluntary work, to take up some study, or join a club.
- ❑ Try to keep away from things you may use to harm yourself.
- ❑ Shout out loud “No” or “Stop”. This helps some people to delay the self-harm.
- ❑ Try to be clear about what you are feeling – is the emotion you are feeling: fear, shame or guilt, anxiety, anger, rage, sadness or depression? Try and observe, label and accept the emotion. Ask yourself why you are feeling it. Remember that you are not your emotion – you don’t have to act on it.

### **If you feel you must hurt yourself**

- Try less destructive ways of doing it. For example, pinching yourself instead of cutting, or holding an ice-cube in your hand.
- Do not share razors or implements with other people because of the risk of HIV and hepatitis. Use clean implements.
- If you are cutting yourself think of the scarring that will be left in the future. Avoid deep cuts.
- Try not to feel too angry with yourself for having done it. Try to make some longer term plans (see below) to avoid doing it in the future. Recognise that it is a difficult pattern to break.
- Learn to clean and dress cuts to avoid infection.
- Remember that if you overdose you are no longer in control of what happens. Even small overdoses can kill.

Some people feel they need to keep using self-harm until they have progressed with other issues.

### **What longer-term solutions are there?**

- Do I really want to stop harming myself? Use this to list the pros and cons of self-harming, the good things and the bad. Make sure to list all the negatives – the scars, the waste of time and energy, the risk of permanent injury and even death, etc. (look back at the reasons other people have given).

<b>Reasons to continue self-harming</b>	<b>Reasons to stop self-harming</b>
..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....	..... ..... ..... ..... ..... ..... .....

**Can I improve the way I communicate?**

If you feel that self-harm is a way that you communicate emotional pain, then it may be helpful to work on communicating in other ways.

The following are important questions to ask yourself:

- What do I feel like when I harm myself?
- Have I ever tried to express in words how bad I feel?
- If not, could I think of words to describe what I feel like?
- Could I share this with anyone? (A friend, family member, therapist)
- Might it help to write it down first of all?
- What do I fear might be the response of those people to what I have to say?

Try to learn to describe how you feel. Try to learn to say no when you would like to. Courses and books on learning to be assertive are widely available. Try assertiveness training. Ask a friend to go with you if your confidence is very low.

## **Understand yourself and others**

If you feel that your self-harm is often in reaction to others around you, it may help to try to increase your understanding of yourself and others. Give yourself some calm time to think in detail about the feelings, thoughts, motives, intentions, beliefs, desires and needs of yourself and others. Slowing things down and trying to see both positions can be really helpful. Try to be kind and empathic in your understanding of yourself and others. This is sometimes called 'mentalising' or 'thinking about thinking'. You can learn to do this better through a therapy called Mentalisation Based Therapy. This is usually done in a group, and may be available through your local mental health services. You can find out more through the suggestions made in the Useful Books and Information section at the end of this booklet.

## **Do I blame myself for everything?**

Many people who harm themselves have experienced some physical, sexual or emotional abuse in their past. Unfortunately they often feel they must take the blame for what has happened to them even if they were very young when this abuse occurred. It can help to reconsider this self-blame. Try this approach. Imagine a friend told you a story almost identical to your own – would you blame him or her because someone else abused them? If not, then why do you continue to blame yourself for what happened to you?

## **Am I looking after myself?**

Take good care of yourself; allow yourself relaxation, pleasures, time for yourself, luxury. Don't allow yourself to feel guilty about this. It is what you need and deserve. Are there issues from my childhood that I need to understand? If there are, try and talk them over with someone. Find a therapist who may be able to help you review this area of your life. Ask your GP or healthcare professional about this.

## **How can I cope with overwhelming feelings?**

Try self-calming techniques. Try relaxation of the body (see the booklet in this series about managing anxiety). Or ask your GP or healthcare professional about medication. Use the senses to calm yourself.

**Touch** – Massage yourself, especially your face and shoulders. Touch some soft fabric, such as silk or velvet. Concentrate on the feelings and learn to enjoy them.

**Hearing** – Listen to some soothing music. Concentrate on the sounds around you. Learn to enjoy sounds.

**Vision** – Look at a beautiful picture, film or object. Concentrate on it and try to enjoy the pleasure of it.

**Smell** – Try perfume, flower scent, or the smell of coffee. Spend some time concentrating on this.

**Taste** – Taste and slowly appreciate something you really enjoy.

**Use your imagination** – Picture pleasant scenes and feelings. Give yourself time and space to try out these things.

## **How can I replace some of the unhelpful things I've used for coping?**

Make a list of things you might enjoy and build these into your day. Here are some examples:

- Listening to music.
- Looking round the shops.
- Eating chocolate.
- Going to see a film or renting a video.
- Watching sport.
- Going out on a trip.
- Reading a good book.
- Doing nothing.
- Reading the paper in peace.
- Going out with friends.
- Doing some sport.
- Try mindfulness
- Try relaxation

Mindfulness and relaxation classes are becoming very popular, and you may find there are classes you can attend locally. Examples of where you can download free mindfulness and relaxation exercises can be found at the end of this booklet.

Make sure there are some good things happening each day and each week. Plan ahead. Build these moments into your life.

## **What about my relationships?**

Look at the relationships you have. Nurture the good ones and end those that might be destructive. If similar destructive relationships are happening to you again and again then try to think what goes wrong. Talk it over with someone. Try to think how you can break the cycle.

## **What about self help?**

There are addresses at the back of this booklet for contacts for self-help groups and organisations. The Internet can also be a good source of advice but some websites may be distressing. Some good websites are also listed at the back of this booklet.



## How can I help a friend or family member who self-harms?

It may help to:

- **Recognise** how distressed the person is **even if they don't seem to be**. Encourage their attempts to control self-harm and don't despair or become angry if they fail to control it.
- Keep an **accepting** attitude towards it. Try to discuss it and try to help him or her to think of ways to control it.
- Get **medical help** if the injuries are serious.
- Discuss with them the idea of seeing a **therapist**. The GP or healthcare professional is a good first port of call for this.
- **Be there** for them.
- Encourage the person to stay in **company**, where they will be less likely to harm themselves.
- Seek **support** yourself if the problem continues.
- Offer **practical help** (e.g. look after children, go shopping with the person etc).
- Give them **time** and talk on their terms.

## Where can I get further help?

We hope the information in this booklet will be useful to you in beginning to understand self-harm.

It may also be helpful for you to seek further support, particularly if you are feeling anxious and/ or depressed. Your GP or healthcare professional may be the best person to talk to first. They may suggest you see a psychological therapist. This could be a trained psychotherapist, clinical psychologist, nurse therapist or psychiatrist. Remember that there are other booklets in this series that give advice on coping with anxiety, panic and depression.

There are other sources of support available to those people who harm themselves (some useful websites are included):

**The internet can be a source of help but please use with caution as some of the content may be distressing.**

## **Useful organisations**

- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**  
Tel: 01455 883 316  
[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)  
Information and advice about counselling and psychotherapy.
- **Healthwatch**  
[www.healthwatch.co.uk](http://www.healthwatch.co.uk)  
Healthwatch England is the independent consumer champion for health and social care in England. Working with local Healthwatch networks, we ensure that the voices of consumers and those who use services reach the ears of the decision makers.
- **Mental Health Matters**  
Tel: 0191 516 3500  
[www.mentalhealthmatters.com](http://www.mentalhealthmatters.com)  
A national organisation which provides support and information on employment, housing, community support and psychological services.
- **Mind Infoline**  
Tel: 0300 123 3393, Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm  
Text: 86463  
[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)  
Provides information on a range of topics including types of mental distress, where to get help, drug and alternative treatments and advocacy. Also provides details of help and support for people in their own area.
- **National Debtline**  
Tel: 0808 808 4000  
[www.nationaldebtline.co.uk](http://www.nationaldebtline.co.uk)  
Help for anyone in debt or concerned they may fall into debt.
- **National Self Harm Network**  
[www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk)  
An online support forum providing crisis support, information and resources, advice, discussions and distractions.
- **NHS Choices – Your health – your choices**  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
Information about conditions, treatments, local services and healthy lives.

- **Rethink**

Helpline: 0300 500 0927 [www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)

Provides information and a helpline for anyone affected by mental health problems.

- **Samaritans**

Tel: 116 123

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO BOX, 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Provides confidential support for anyone in a crisis.

- **Self Injury Support**

Email and Text Support Service: 0780 047 2908 (for girls and women up to 24 years)

Self Injury Helpline: 0808 800 8088

[www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk](http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk)

A national organisation that supports girls and women in emotional distress who harm themselves. Support Service available Monday to Friday 7pm-9pm.

- **The Mental Health Foundation**

[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

Provides mental health related resources, information and campaigns but does not run a helpline.

- **North Tyneside Talking Therapies**

Tel: 0191 295 2775

[www.northumbria.nhs.uk/talkingtherapies](http://www.northumbria.nhs.uk/talkingtherapies)

Offers a range of talking therapies and courses for people 16+ in North Tyneside registered with a North Tyneside GP who are feeling stressed, anxious, low in mood or depressed.

Wallsend Health Centre, The Green, Wallsend, NE28 7PD

## **Useful books and information**

- **For friends and family: a guide for supporters of women and girls who self-injure**

Lois Arnold, Bristol Crisis Service for Women 1998

The aim of this booklet is to help those who want to understand and support a woman or young person who struggles with self-injury.

[www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/publications-about-self-injury](http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/publications-about-self-injury)

- **Healing the hurt within: understand self-injury and self-harm and heal the emotional wounds (3rd revised edition)**

J Sutton

How to Books Ltd. 2007

Offers solace, hope, and direction to those who self-injure; guidance to family and friends supporting a loved one who self-injures; and guidelines to professionals and voluntary caregivers on how to respond to clients that self-injure.

- **Overcoming low self-esteem: a self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques (2nd edition)**

Melanie Fennell

Constable and Robinson 2009

This is a guide which is full of real-life examples, intended for people who suffer from low self-esteem and for those who help them.

- **Self-injury support and self help groups**

Karin Parker and Hilary Lindsay

Bristol Crisis Service for Women 1998

This booklet is for anyone interested in setting up or being involved in a self-help group.

[www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/publications-about-self-injury](http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/publications-about-self-injury)

- **The scarred soul: understanding and ending self-inflicted violence**

Tracy Alderman

New Harbinger 1997

Written for the victims of this addiction, and for mental health professionals, The Scarred Soul explores the reasons behind this behaviour and shows how to overcome the psychological traps that lead to self-destructive acts.

- **Women who hurt themselves (10th edition)**

D. Miller

Basic Books 2005

A book that provides help for the thousands of women who secretly inflict violence on themselves.

## **Mindfulness downloads**

- **Franticworld.com Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World** – Free meditations and mindfulness resources.
- **www.headspace.com** – A free taster of mindfulness, with an opt-in to buy further sessions
- **www.freemindfulness.org** – A collection of free to download meditations

## **Relaxation downloads**

- **<http://wellbeing-glasgow.org.uk/audio-resources/>**
- **[www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/relax.php](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/relax.php)**

## **References**

A full list of references is available on request by emailing [pic@ntw.nhs.uk](mailto:pic@ntw.nhs.uk)

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Northumberland, Tyne and Wear   
NHS Foundation Trust

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Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust has developed this resource with the support of NHS healthcare staff, service users and local voluntary sector groups in Northumberland, Tyne and Wear.



