

Self-Harm

Guidance for Working with Children and Young People in Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset.

The Young People Who Self Harm Guide (2016) was developed by researchers and clinicians at the University of Oxford for school staff who may have contact with students who have self-harmed or are at risk of self-harm. In it you will find information about self-harm and its impact, and some practical ways to help you support young people.

<https://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/FAQs/young-people-who-self-harm-a-guide-for-school-staff>

This document is a summary of the Oxford guidance, adapted for professionals working with children and young people in non-school settings. It covers the main content and has been adapted to include local resources in Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire.

The guidance and summary should be read and used in conjunction with the statutory guidance [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#), which includes 'preventing impairment of children's mental and physical health or development' as part of the official definition of safeguarding

It is important to respond to any incident of self-harm as a safeguarding concern and in accordance with statutory duties and with your organisation's safeguarding policies. [South West Child Protection Procedures](#) set out detailed policy and guidance and include partnership arrangements for safeguarding.

What is Self-Harm?

Self-harm is any act of intentional self-injury or self-poisoning. Examples include:

- Self-cutting
- Taking an overdose
- Swallowing objects or poisons
- Hitting or bruising
- Self-strangulation with ligatures
- Burning

Self-harm is common in young people: at least 10% report having self-harmed¹. It is more common in females than males, especially in early adolescence. Self-harm is much less frequent in younger children, but under the age of 11 self-harm is more common in boys than in girls. Self-harm may present somewhat differently in this age group; for example, scratching, picking scabs, head-banging, other forms of self-injury or reckless behaviour.

¹ Mental Health Foundation [The truth about self-harm | Mental Health Foundation](#)

Why do young people self-harm?

Self-harm can have a range of functions, which will be different for each person. Reasons for self-harm include:

- to manage emotional upset
- to reduce tension
- to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- an expression of abuse or harm from another person
- a form of escape
- an effort to regain control over feelings or problems
- an attempt to punish oneself or others
- to elicit care from others
- to identify with a peer group

Self-harm can be a way of coping with life stresses, but in some cases, it can be a suicide attempt. Some young people who self-harm may also experience suicidal thoughts, and self-harm is a risk factor for suicide, although fortunately suicide in young people is relatively rare.

How to support young people who self-harm

- Listen and let young people know that you take their emotions seriously and you want to try to help them.
- Identify a safe adult they can talk to
- Try to help them manage their feelings.
- Remind them of other ways to cope.
- Take talk of suicide very seriously.
- Don't let self-harm become the focus of your relationship with the young person.
- Remind them of their strengths and abilities.
- Work out with the young person, ways to make it more difficult for them to self-harm (e.g. by safer storage of medication or removing sharp objects).
- Watch for signs of bullying or abuse that may be triggering self-harm.
- Make a safety plan that includes warning signs, distraction techniques, calming and soothing strategies, how other people can help, who to call in an emergency and when to contact A&E.

Practical Strategies

The following are practical ways to manage self-harm that can be suggested to children and young people. Although not all of these will work for everyone, some of these suggestions may be helpful. It may take a while to get self-harm under control, but with practice the young person can usually develop positive ways of coping

1. *Building support networks*

It is helpful to identify who can support the young person and how they can get in touch with them. This might be friends, family, schoolteacher, youth worker etc. Knowing how to access a crisis line is also important.

2. *Distraction activities*

Replacing self-harm with other safer activities can be a positive way of coping with urges to self-harm. It is important to find things that the young person is interested in. Examples include:

- Going for a walk or other forms of physical exercise
- Getting out of the house and going to a public place
- Watching a film
- Reading a book
- Taking a dog for a walk or caring for a pet
- Watching TV
- Listening to music
- Engaging in self-soothing activity, such as having a relaxing bath

3. *Coping with symptoms of physical stress*

There are a number of strategies that can help to manage the extreme tension in the body that young people may feel. Examples include:

- Clenching ice cubes in the hand until they melt
- Hitting a pillow or soft object
- Paced breathing (extending the breathing):
 - Sit comfortably
 - Breathe in for the count of 4
 - Breathe out to the count of 6
 - Notice your stomach moving out as you breathe in
- Counting (allows the body to slow down) e.g. count 10 films, 10 animals, 10 flowers etc.
- Engaging in physical exercise
- Relaxation exercises

Where to get further help

Face to Face Support

School Health Nurse the school health nurses are commissioned to support pupils around their mental health needs and have all had training on responding to self-harm [School Nursing Service – Children and Young People’s Services](#)

CAMHS Primary Mental Health Specialist Consultation (currently available in Bristol and South Gloucestershire). Every school in Bristol and South Gloucestershire has a named PMHS. Contact your local CAMHS team if you are unsure who your PMHS is: North Bristol CAMHS 0117 354 6800 South Bristol CAMHS 0117 340 8121 / 0117 9190330 East Central CAMHS 0117 340 8600 South Glos CAMHS 01454 862431.

Off the Record offer a range of one-to-one therapies for 11-17 year olds [1:1 Therapies - OTR](#)

NHS Talking Therapies is a free services offering support to anyone over the age of 16 [NHS Talking Therapies - North Somerset & South Gloucestershire](#)

Online Support

Kooth is an online mental wellbeing community for young people aged 11 to 18 in Bristol and South Gloucestershire and those aged 10-18 in North Somerset. It provides free, safe and anonymous, support: www.kooth.com

Harmless works to overcome issues related to self-harm and suicide. www.harmless.org.uk

Staying Safe (from suicidal thoughts) Download a safety plan, with filmed support to complete one: [https://staying-safe.net/how to make a safety plan](https://staying-safe.net/how-to-make-a-safety-plan)

Helplines

Childline for under 19s: Tel.: 0800 111 Help and advice about a wide range of issues, talk to a counsellor online, send an email or post on the message boards www.childline.org.uk

Papyrus is the UK Charity for the prevention of young suicide (under 35). It provides confidential support and advice to young people and anyone supporting them. HOPELINEUK call 0800 068 4141 (24/7) Text: 88247 Email pat@papyrus-uk.org
[Papyrus UK Suicide Prevention | Prevention of Young Suicide](#)

Self-Injury Support – support for women and girls. Free downloads. Self-injury helpline Tel.: 0808 800 8088 every Monday and Thursday 7pm – 10pm
www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

Shout www.giveusashout.org Text SHOUT 85258 a free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope.

Young Minds has a free Parents' Helpline: 0808 802 5544 from 9:30am - 4pm, Mon – Fri

Online Resources & General Mental Health Information

Young Minds gives free, relevant, practical information about a range of mental health issues in children and young people up to the age of 25. It has information about feelings and symptoms, conditions and looking after yourself. It also has some specific information about self-harm and what to do about self-harm

Off the Record has a range of online resources available, drop in Hubs and group sessions on a range of mental health topics [Home - OTR](#)

MindEd is a free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults: www.minded.org.uk

Relate gives specific advice for different types of worries and problems aimed at young people. <https://www.relate.org.uk/relationship-help/help-family-lifeand-parenting/parenting-teenagers/mental-health/self-harm>

Live Well is a useful site that offers guidance and support around mental health and wellbeing <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/>

If these resources are not effective, it may be advisable for the young person to visit their GP who may decide to refer them to CAMHS where an assessment would be carried out and a plan made for support and treatment. If a child goes to hospital for reasons related to self-harm, they will be seen by someone from CAMHS who will assess their mental health and support a plan for safe discharge which may include the production of a safety plan.