

self-harm

YOUTH FOCUS FACT SHEET

Some young people deliberately harm themselves, usually to cope with difficult, painful or distressing feelings. Self-harm can occur in many forms such as cutting, burning, scratching and hitting your body. There are many reasons why someone may self-harm. It may be a way of telling someone that you need help or a way of coping with a mental illness such as Depression. Not all people who self-harm are suicidal, but sometimes people can die as a result of their self-harming behaviour.

What this fact sheet includes:

- Why do people self-harm?
- What types of behaviour suggest self-harm?
- Strategies for coping without harming yourself
- How to support a young person who self-harms
- Important points to remember.

Why do people self-harm?

People who engage in self-harming behaviour may be living with a mental illness such as anxiety or depression and have often experienced emotional hardship, difficult relationships and tough life experiences. People who self-harm are usually trying to express, control or relieve their painful or distressing feelings. A person who self-harms may have:

- Lost someone close to them, such as a family member or friend
- Been physically, emotionally or sexually abused
- Been bullied or experienced discrimination
- Experienced family conflict or breakdown
- Live in a stressful or critical environment
- Experienced difficulties with peer groups or other relationships
- Broken up with a girlfriend or boyfriend
- Experienced an illness or disability that affects the way they feel about themselves.

What behaviour suggests self-harm?

- Cutting parts of the body such as wrists, arms and thighs
- Burning the skin with cigarettes or lighters
- Hitting parts of the body
- Overdosing on prescribed medications, illegal drugs or substances that can cause physical harm
- Other 'risk taking' behaviours such as reckless driving, illegal use of drugs and purposefully engaging in un-safe sexual practices and aggressive confrontations can also lead to harm.

Strategies for coping without harming:

- Try to delay self-harm by talking to someone you trust as soon as you feel the urge to harm
- Write your thoughts in a journal
- Go for a walk or run – exercise releases serotonin, a chemical in the brain that can help to lift your mood
- Practice relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, yoga or meditation
- Cry – this still allows your body to release feelings of sadness or frustration
- Distract yourself with a task to interrupt your thoughts of self-harm

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Alternatives to self-harm:

- Have a freezing cold shower for at least a few minutes
- Hold an ice cube tight in your hand – it will ache but will not harm you
- Put an elastic band around your wrist and snap it against your skin creating a slight sting
- Punch a pillow or use a punching bag with boxing gloves
- Using red pen, draw red marks on your body where you would usually cut.

Don't give up! Look for another person who you feel will be able to support you in a positive way. If speaking about your self-harm is too difficult find other ways to communicate such as writing or painting.

Important points to remember

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health emergency call the Mental Health Emergency Response Line (MHERL) on 1300 555 788 (all hours) 1800 676 822 (rural free call).

How to access support

It may be useful to tell someone you trust about your self-harming behaviour. Being able to talk to someone who understands you will assist in helping you express your feelings. A counsellor or psychologist will be able to help you identify and work with some of the feelings and reasons why you are harming yourself, along with being able to suggest coping strategies and harm minimisation techniques that will keep you safe. Work with a trusted individual to find a counsellor that is right for you. The counsellors at Youth Focus specialise in working with young people who self-harm and can see you in the community or at school.

Disclosing your self-harming behaviour to a close friend or family member might sometimes result in a negative reaction. It is important to remember that it is not because you have done something wrong, but because they may not know anything about self-harm or know how to respond.

