



Self-harm

What is self-harm?

Self-harm means any behaviour which involves the deliberate causing of pain or injury to oneself - usually as an extreme way of trying to cope with distressing or painful feelings.

Self-harm includes cutting, burning or hitting oneself, binge-eating or starvation, or repeatedly putting oneself in dangerous situations. It can also involve abuse of drugs or alcohol, including overdosing on prescription medications.

Why do people harm themselves?

Self-harm is often a response to feelings of extreme psychological distress or emotional pain. It may provide short-term relief from these feelings. It may be an attempt to express or even control them briefly. It does not resolve them, however, and can become a compulsive and dangerous activity.

While people who self-harm may not intend to end their lives, the consequences of this risky behaviour can be fatal, and it needs careful assessment and care by a health professional.

How do you get help if you self-harm?

As well as being physically dangerous, self-harm is often a sign that the person needs help for a mental health problem associated with the behaviour. This might be an anxiety disorder, depression or some other condition. It is very important to see a GP or other health professional, therefore, for an assessment and diagnosis, and to discuss a treatment plan. Treating the underlying causes will help make a long-term difference to reducing and stopping the impulse to self-harm.

Treatment is likely to involve seeing a psychologist who is expert in this area, and will know how to help the person best, and to help them to help themselves.

It's a good idea to prepare for seeing a doctor by talking to a trusted person about the self-harming behaviour. This might be a family member or friend, or a suitable person at school or work. It's also helpful to request a longer appointment, so that there is time to talk, and to take along some simple notes- for example, detailing how long the self-harming has been going on, and any other feelings or events which may be associated with it.

Because self-harming behaviour is risky and possibly life-threatening, do not hesitate to call emergency services on 000 if necessary.

How to get additional information
www.MiNetworks.org.au
1800 985 944
www.mifa.org.au

Are there alternatives to self-harm?

It can be hard for people who self-harm to stop it by themselves. That's why it's important to talk to someone and to see a doctor. It can help to use alternatives to self-harm which fulfil the same function of relieving distress in the short term.

Delay - for example, put off until you have spoken to someone.

Distract - for example, go for walk, play a game.

Divert - for example, an activity which has a similar effect to self-harm, but without causing injury, such as punching a pillow, drawing on arm instead of cutting, squeezing an ice-cube.

Deep breathing - or other relaxation method.

These are not solutions to self-harm but can be useful as short-term alternatives while receiving treatment, and should be discussed with the treating doctor or psychologist.

How do I help someone who self-harms?

People who self-harm may be secretive or feel ashamed about their behaviour. It helps to talk calmly and non-judgmentally about your concerns therefore.

- Encourage the person to see a doctor or other health professional about the self-harming.
- Suggest options for getting help, rather than directing the person what to do.

Do not hesitate to call emergency services on 000 if you think the person is at risk of serious injury.

Remember that you cannot stop someone from self-harming and it is not your responsibility when they do. You can only do your best to encourage them to get help.

Where to call for help

Immediate assistance

Emergency services 000
Local hospital Psychiatric Emergency Team

Telephone counselling

Lifeline 13 11 14
Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

Information and advice on mental illness

1800 18 SANE (7263)