

Types and signs

Self-harm

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Self-harm is when somebody intentionally damages or injures their body. It's a way of coping with or expressing overwhelming emotional distress.

Sometimes when people self-harm, they feel on some level that they intend to die. More than half of people who die by suicide have a history of self-harm.

But more often they wish to punish themselves or relieve unbearable tension. Sometimes it's a mixture of both. Self-harm can also be used to communicate distress to other people.

Self-harm can bring an immediate sense of relief but it is only a temporary solution. It can also cause permanent scarring and damage to your body if you injure nerves.

Self-harm:

- should not be dismissed as attention seeking
- should always be taken seriously so emotional problems do not escalate
- does not mean there's something wrong with you - but it can be a sign of underlying mental health problems

Types of self-harm

There are many different ways people can intentionally harm themselves.

These include:

- cutting or burning their skin
- punching or hitting themselves
- poisoning themselves with tablets or toxic chemicals
- misusing alcohol or drugs

- deliberately starving themselves or binge eating
- exercising too much

People often try to keep self-harm a secret because of shame or fear of it being seen. They may cover up their skin and avoid talking about the problem.

People who self-harm may not look for help themselves. Close family and friends may need to take the first steps.

If you notice that somebody is self-harming, approach the subject with care and understanding.

Self-harm can also include suicidal behaviours such as overdoses.

[What to do if you're worried about someone else's mental health](#)

Signs of self-harm

If you think a friend or relative is self-harming, look out for signs, including:

- unexplained cuts, bruises or cigarette burns - usually on the wrists, arms, thighs and chest
- keeping themselves fully covered at all times, even in hot weather
- pulling out their hair
- misusing alcohol or drugs
- self-loathing and expressing a wish to punish themselves
- speaking about not wanting to go on and wishing to end it all
- becoming very withdrawn and not speaking to others
- changes in eating habits or being secretive about eating
- unusual weight loss or weight gain
- signs of low self-esteem, such as blaming themselves for any problems or thinking they're not good enough
- signs of depression, such as low mood, crying or a lack of motivation or interest in anything

People who self-harm can seriously hurt themselves. While they are continuing to use this as a 'coping' mechanism they are not learning effective ways of managing distress.

It's important that they speak to a GP about the underlying issue. They should ask for treatment or therapy.

[Getting help for self-harm](#)

[How to help someone who self-harms](#)

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