

**Self-harm refers to people deliberately hurting or mutilating their bodies without necessarily wanting to die. It often begins in the teenage years.**



# Self Harm



There are a number of reasons why you may self-harm. It may be a way of telling other people about your distress and asking for help, a way of coping with stress or emotional pain, or a symptom of a mental illness like depression. Sometimes it suggests that you thinking about suicide. Not everyone who self-harms is suicidal, but sometimes people die as a result of their self-harm behaviour.

## What types of behaviour suggest self-harm?

Many different types of behaviour can be considered self-harming, including:

- Cutting part of the body, commonly the arms, wrists, or thighs
- Using cigarettes or lighters to burn the skin.
- Taking overdoses of prescribed or illegal drugs or other substances that cause harm

Other 'risk taking' behaviour can lead to harm, such as train surfing, driving cars at high speed, illegal drug use, or deliberately unsafe sex.

## What causes self-harm?

People who self-harm are usually trying to relieve, control or express their distressing feelings. Young people self-harm for different reasons, and sometimes it can be difficult to put the reasons into words. You may not know any other way of telling people about their emotional pain, or feel a sense of control over your pain when you self-harm.

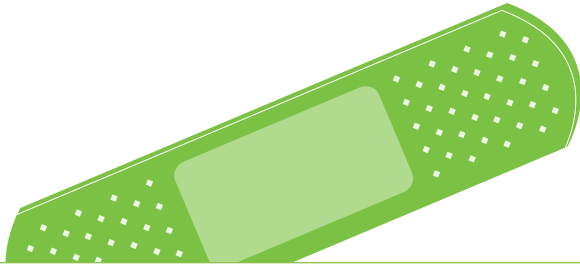
Some people are more likely to self-harm than others, including those who have experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse, have had a stressful and highly critical family environment, or have a mental illness such as depression.

## What can you do if you self-harm?

First, try to talk to someone about it. Telling a trusted adult can help keep you safe and get medical assistance if you need it. If you repeatedly self-harm, counselling can help you feel better and find other ways of coping.

If you are thinking about suicide, then see a health professional, call your local hospital, or call a phone counselling service (such as Kids Helpline on 1800 55 1800, or Lifeline on 13 11 14).

Counselling aims to provide other ways to deal with your problems, including better communication and coping skills. Sometimes this can take time, so it's best to keep attending counselling even if you find it hard the first few times. It might be hard to accept counselling if you feel guilty, angry, or ashamed, but try to be open to the support that people want to provide.



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### How can I help a young person who self-harms?

Some young people stop self-harming on their own, without any help. Others continue in a fairly safe way, while others place themselves at risk of dying.

The best way to help someone is to provide support and encourage them to ask for professional help. Try to make them feel safe enough to discuss their feelings. Remain calm and maintain an open attitude, while recognising the young person might feel ashamed of their actions and worry about your judgements.

Check whether the person is thinking about suicide, and call your local hospital or mental health service if you think they are. Call an ambulance (phone 000) or take the person to the emergency department of the local hospital if they need urgent medical attention.

Supporting someone who self-harms can be a stressful experience, so think about getting support for yourself as well.

For more information, and to find out how to get help, visit the headspace website: **[www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)**