

How to Deal with Self-Harm

We all need healthy ways to cope with the hard stuff. We're here to help you find a healthy alternative to self-harm.

What is Self-Harm?

For some people, when depression and anxiety lead to a tornado of emotions, they turn to self-harm, looking for a release. Self-harm and self-injury are any forms of hurting oneself on purpose. Usually, when people self-harm, they do not do so as a suicide attempt. Rather, they self-harm as a way to release painful emotions.

Types of Self-Harm

Self-harm can manifest differently for everyone. And, the ways people may self-harm extend far beyond the usual references to cutting in media. Simply, self-harm is anything and everything someone can do to purposely hurt their body.

Here are some of the most common types of self-injury:

- Cutting
- Scratching
- Burning
- Carving words or symbols into the skin
- Hitting or punching oneself (including banging one's head or other body parts against another surface)
- Piercing the skin with sharp objects such as hairpins
- Pulling out hair
- Picking at existing wounds

Symptoms of Self-Harm

Stigma creates shame and embarrassment, making it hard for people who self-harm to get help. So, look out for yourself and for your friends. If you suspect that someone in your life is self-harming, here are some warning signs to keep in mind:

- Scars
- Fresh cuts, burns, scratches or bruises
- Rubbing an area excessively to create a burn
- Having sharp objects to hand
- Always wearing long sleeves or long trousers, even in hot weather
- Difficulties with interpersonal relationships
- Persistent questions about personal identity
- Behavioural and emotional instability, impulsiveness or unpredictability
- Saying that they feel helpless, hopeless or worthless

How to Deal With Self-Harm

Emotions can be really painful sometimes. It's totally normal to need ways to cope with and process the hard things in your life. If you are using self-harm to manage your emotions, we're here for you. And, we want to help keep you safe.

Here are some ways to push through, process and cope with your emotions.

- Ask for help. If you're dealing with painful emotions, there are people willing to help. Connect with a real human and work out healthy coping mechanisms to manage your emotions.
- Get creative. Studies show that diving into making art can help people process emotions. So, next time you're feeling like self-harming, grab your pencil and doodle your worries away. A bonus: you can totally suck at it and still reap the same rewards.
- Find your zen. Keeping yourself safe from self-harming is all about finding healthy alternatives to work through the hard stuff. Researchers found that taking time to centre yourself through meditation is be a powerful way to find your cool and calm. Try using an app like Headspace to get on the meditation bandwagon.
- Talk to a pro. Self-harm is serious. And, while the intention behind self-harm usually is not death, it can still be dangerous – both physically and emotionally. Talking to someone who can help you find alternatives is incredibly important. Also, consider telling someone you know who can help you connect with a professional.

Why Do People Self-Harm?

Let's start with this: everyone needs a way to cope with their emotions. People who self-harm have turned to hurting themselves as their coping mechanism to manage their emotions.

So, people might self-harm to:

- Process their negative feelings
- Distract themselves from their negative feelings
- Feel something physical, particularly if they are feeling numb
- Develop a sense of control over their lives
- Punish themselves for things they think they've done wrong
- Express emotions that they are otherwise embarrassed to show

Effects of Self-Harm

Self-harm can be seriously dangerous – physically, emotionally, socially, all of it.

Physical Effects of Self-Harm

- Permanent scars
- Uncontrolled bleeding
- Infection

Emotional Effects of Self-Harm

- Guilt or shame
- A diminished sense of self, including feeling helpless or worthless
- Addiction to the behaviour

Social Effects of Self-Harm

- Avoiding friends and loved ones
- Becoming ostracised from loved ones who may not understand
- Interpersonal difficulty from lying to others about injuries

Recovering from Self-Harm

A lot of people who self-harm do so because they are dealing with painful emotions. If this applies to you, hi – we believe in you and recognise your pain. Because painful emotions are at the root of self-harm, quite often recovering from self-harm involves addressing emotions.

Breaking away from the cycle of self-harm can feel like a huge climb. It involves breaking a habit that has once brought comfort from pain. But it is not impossible. Here are some steps to set you up for success:

- Name your reason for hurting yourself and your reason for quitting. Ask yourself: “What do I feel before, during, and after self-injury?”

Which of those emotions do I actively seek out, and which are harmful?”

- Identify other ways of achieving the same result. For example, if you self-harm for the physical sensation, seek other ways of releasing endorphins, like exercise. For real, try throwing a few punches at a kickboxing class or releasing at a spin class with the *perfect* playlist. If you self-harm to express your emotions, practice expressing them in words by writing them down. Grab a pen and your favourite notebook, or start typing away in your notes app.
- Tackle the underlying emotions. Explore the feelings that lead you to want to hurt yourself. If it's guilt, where is that guilt coming from? Perhaps try to find a therapist – there are pros trained specifically to help with this.
- Tell someone you trust. Let a friend, family member or trusted adult know what you're going through and that you need their support. Opening up to people can be easier said than done. Here's a place to start: “I'm having a hard time processing some painful emotions and I could use your support right now.”

Getting healthy – both in your brain and in your body – takes hard work. You've got this. And we believe in you.