

Non-Suicidal Self-Harm

Overview description

Non-Suicidal Self Harm is a broad term that covers a variety of things that people do to hurt themselves physically in a deliberate and usually hidden way, Crucially, it is a sign of *distress*. Self-harm by children and young people (C/YP) most often involves: overdoses, self-mutilation (e.g. cutting behaviours), burning, scalding, banging body parts against walls, hair-pulling, and biting. In the vast majority of cases self-harm remains a secretive behaviour.

Self-harm is a way of *coping* in the absence of having other means. It not the same as attempting suicide. Self-harm does not *directly* lead to suicide, however both have a common root in deep distress, and it is the single strongest predictor of suicide.

Young people who self-harm mainly do so because they have no other way of coping with problems and emotional distress in their lives. It can provide temporary relief from an otherwise overwhelming situation or emotional state but comes at the price of immense shame. Commonly a combination background factors is involved, such as:

- Feeling isolated
- Relationship problems (friends & family)
- Education problems & academic pressures
- Being bullied
- Offending
- Drug & alcohol use

Evidence-base

How common is it?

Self-harm is a common behaviour in young people, with 10% of 15-16-year olds self-harming at any time (Young Minds, 2018). The average age of onset is 12 years old, becoming more common after the age of 16. Primary age children also self-harm.

Who is at risk?

Self-harm can affect anyone, but is more likely amongst some groups of people, or because of things that are happening in their lives. Self-harm is more common in young women (especially young Black women), for children/ young people who identify as LGBTQ+, and for those who have a mental health problem. Other risk factors include:

- poverty
- being looked after

- experiencing domestic violence
- experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse
- parents involved in offending/ criminal justice system
- a family history of self-harm or suicide

Prevention

- Young people told the Truth Hurts inquiry (Resource 8, below) that often all they want is to be able to talk about problems in their daily lives to someone who will listen without judgement. As such, school/education setting-based work is one of the most promising areas where the prevention of self-harm can be successfully tackled.
- Young people are often ashamed to seek help and so education settings will need to actively reach out to those vulnerable to using self-harm.
- Many young people prefer to turn to other young people for support. Truth Hurts recommends the development of peer support schemes within the context of a whole school approach to mental health.

Interventions

The common features of effective support approaches, packages or plans involve:

- Building coping skills
- Supporting the young person to connect with others
- Supporting the family (acceptance of self-harm is especially hard)
- Working to build a supportive & effective system around the young person
- Addressing often multiple underlying factors
- Helping the young person to develop or access emotionally supportive relationships
- Referrals to relevant professional services from within health, education, children's services, and the third sector)
- Making use of support groups

Working with Young People

Responding to disclosures of self-harm

- Stay calm & caring. Take their concerns seriously
- Explain confidentiality requirements from the start
- Try to understand the purpose self-harm is serving, but avoid asking directly why they self-harm as many young people won't be able to explain it
- Jointly problem-solve and come to a shared understanding of what together you are hoping to achieve
- Encourage connection & communication with others, including professionals & support groups
- Help them retain a sense of control - especially if you need to pass information on

The Greater Manchester Children's Safeguarding Board procedures (item 10 under Resources below) provide detailed guidance to adults on responding and supporting young people who disclose self-harm. Local CAMHS teams can also provide telephone advice via a duty worker (see item 3 under Organisations below).

Confidentiality & Information Sharing: involving parents/ carers, referring to agencies, and safeguarding.

- Explain at the outset, openly and honestly, under what circumstances and how information will be shared
- Seek consent to share confidential information. **However, you may still share information if, in your judgment, there is sufficient need to override the lack of consent**
- Seek advice from your designated safeguarding lead if you are in doubt.

If a child under 13 discloses self-harming behaviour it is **always** important to involve a trusted adult (usually a parent/carer) as the child does not have capacity to make decisions about their care.

Young people aged 13 plus can make informed choices over whom they wish to share personal information with, unless they are deemed as not competent (i.e. there are concerns about their cognitive ability to make informed choices). The exception to this is if you are concerned that the young person is experiencing or may experience significant harm. **In such cases it is always important to share information with the relevant people, regardless of consent from the young person.**

Coping

Self-help techniques are vital whilst the underlying factors are being tackled (sites below provide ideas around these). Examples include

- Distraction and deferring self-harm, even for a short time
- Replacing self-harm with a safer activity that fulfils the same purpose (e.g. using a red water-soluble felt tip pen to mark instead of cutting).
- Taking part in activities, such as those offered by local youth or sports clubs
- Simply having the chance to talk without experiencing disapproval

The free award-winning teenage Calm Harm app uses the principles of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT). DBT is an evidence-based therapy for people with overwhelming strong emotions and there is good evidence for its effectiveness in reducing self-harm.



Top
Tips!

For Early
Years

Some early years children may self-harm in ways such as hair pulling, scratching themselves or head banging. At this age this may be related to a sensory preference and this behaviour could be acting as a way of communicating this need.

Think about what the child may be seeking in these times of distress; they may need an alternate outlet that provides them with the same sensation in a safe way. For example, biting on a chew toy, scratching on a rough piece of fabric, pulling/stretching/ twisting play doh/blue-tac.

Manchester offer

In Manchester the Thrive in Education team have developed a risk and crisis management framework that supports secondary schools and colleges to respond to students who self-harm or are expressing suicidal ideation. See the mental health chapter for more information about how to get in touch with the Thrive in Education team.

Useful Resources

1) **Calm Harm** - free DBT based app that supports self-management of self-harm
<https://calmharm.co.uk/#row1>

2) **Responding to Self-Harm in Children and Adolescents** - A Professional's Guide to Identification, Intervention and Support (2012) by Steve Walker. ISBN 9781849051729

3) **Self-Harm and Eating Disorders in Schools** - A Guide to Whole-School Strategies and Practical Support (2015) by Pooky Knightsmith. ISBN 9781849055840

4) **Self-harm in Children and Young People Handbook** (National CAMHS Support Service) - a pretty comprehensive summary accessible to the non-specialist professional. self-harm-in-children-and-young-people-handbook.pdf
(healthyyoungmindspennine.nhs.uk)

5) **Self-harm in young people**: for parents & carers (Royal College of Psychiatrists) - free downloadable leaflet
<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/information-for-parents-and-carers/self-harm-in-young-people-for-parents-and-carers>

6) **Suicide & Self Harm by children & young people** – advice for practitioners & parents

<https://greatermanchesterscp.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/young-people-and-self-harm>
<https://talklistenchange.org.uk/enquire>

7) **The Truth About Self-harm** - booklet for young people, parents and carers (Mental Health Foundation)

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/truth-about-self-harm>

8) **Truth Hurts** - report of the national inquiry into self-harm amongst young people (Mental Health Foundation)

https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/truth_hurts.pdf

9) **Young Minds website** - page for young people on self-harm

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/feelings-and-symptoms/self-harm/>

10) **Young People and Self-Harm: procedures & advice** - this document is designed to help a range of professionals, working across agencies in Greater Manchester, to respond to the issue of self-harm amongst young people in a consistent, caring and effective way.

<https://greatermanchesterscp.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/young-people-and-self-harm>

Useful links to organisations

1) **42nd Street** - Manchester's third sector organisation providing young people with mental health support

<https://www.42ndstreet.org.uk/about-us.html>

2) **Kooth** - free & trustworthy online mental health support for young people

<https://www.kooth.com/>

3) **Manchester Foundation Trust CAMHS** main page (Manchester, Salford & Trafford)

<https://mft.nhs.uk/rmch/services/camhs/>

4) **Manchester Foundation Trust CAMHS** Young People's page - lots of useful links and leaflets, including about self-harm [Young People - Royal Manchester Children's Hospital \(mft.nhs.uk\)](https://www.mft.nhs.uk/young-people)

5) **Royal College of Psychiatrists** - page on young people's mental health, sections for young people and for parents/ carers

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people>

6) **Talk Listen Change** - third sector Manchester organisation, currently (April 2021) providing support for young people aged 14-19 years old experienced/ experiencing domestic abuse and using harm to others and/or self.

7) **Young Minds** - excellent mental health advice for young people, parents' carers & professionals

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Manchester Safeguarding Partnership –
Suicide and Self Harm by children:

<https://greatermanchesterscp.trixonline.co.uk/chapter/young-people-and-self-harm>

Mental Health:

<https://www.manchestersafeguardingpartnership.co.uk/resource/mental-health/>