

Self-harm and working in schools

Content warning: *this entire resource discusses self-harm and has some mention of suicidal thoughts.*



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Introduction

Increasingly teachers and other school staff are being made aware of self-harm, what it is, and how to talk to pupils about it.

The mental health of children and young people is rightly in the spotlight and is likely to remain there. Are school staff considered in these discussions? And does your school take staff into consideration when developing support, training and guidance?

This guide is designed for people working in schools who feel they or a colleague may be at risk of self-harm. It contains information on how to recognise self-harm, how to get help or offer support, and how school managers and leaders can address the subject.

Some of the content in this resource may be difficult to read. Try to set aside safe and appropriate time and space to consider the contents. If you need support, please see the further information and support at the end of this document.



What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when someone intentionally damages or injures their body, as a way of coping with painful or overwhelming feelings and experiences.

People self-harm for a range of reasons, which we go into below. Remember that anyone experiencing self-harm is experiencing pain or difficulty. Meet them with compassion and kindness first and foremost.

There is a link between self-harm and suicide or suicidal thoughts but not everyone who self-harms wants to end their life. Self-harm is sometimes described as a way of staying alive.

Self-harm is said by those who do it to offer a short-term release, but it doesn't remove the initial cause for carrying it out. These sources of pain and distress likely still exist and the self-harm may make the daily business of life harder, for example by creating feelings of a dependency on it, or by causing scarring that may be a source of shame or embarrassment.



Why do people self-harm?

Motivations

It is often said to be a way to express or cope with emotional distress, although different people have different ways of describing it. Some of these descriptions include self-harm as a way to:

- Gain a sense of control
- Escape traumatic or difficult memories
- Stop feeling disconnected
- Turn emotional pain into physical pain
- Express something impossible to put into words
- Reduce a feeling of being completely overwhelmed

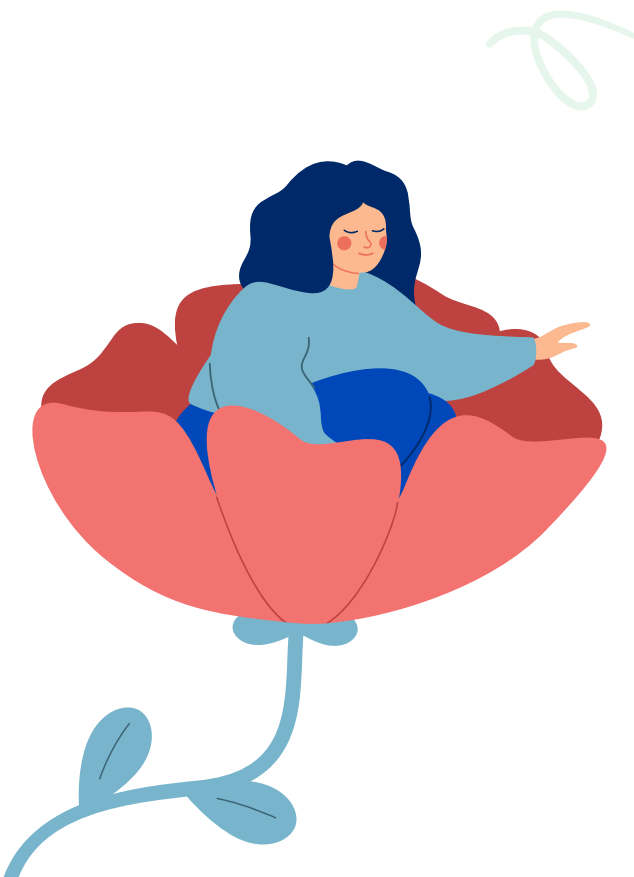
But everyone is different, and it is best to avoid assumptions about people's motivations unless they state them directly.



Triggers

There are many possible causes, or triggers, of the emotional distress that may lie behind self-harm. Often it may be impossible to pin point a single cause. Some examples include:

- Being bullied
- Experiencing trauma or adverse childhood events
- Pressure at school or work
- Family arguments or relationship problems
- Finance problems
- Low self-esteem
- Experiencing stress, anxiety or depression
- Difficult emotions or experiences related to sexuality or gender identity
- Grief after bereavement or loss
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Experiencing complex mental health difficulties



Why is this important in schools?



There is no such thing as a typical person who self-harms. Self-harm is something that can affect anyone. If your school enjoys a large and diverse staff body, it is likely that this includes someone who has direct or indirect experience with self-harm.

With teachers and school staff increasingly discussing mental health issues, including self-harm, with pupils it is important that conversations staff can talk to each other too. Teaching these sensitive topics is vital, but it can also be draining or even triggering. Without the right support structures, harm could be caused to staff without it being detected or understood.



School leaders: Do your staff team know how to spot the signs of self-harm and how to get help if they need it?

Schools have a duty of care towards their employees which includes taking measures to safeguard and support staff's mental and physical health. Self-harm has an impact on both and may indicate unresolved stressors linked to the workplace, such as extreme stress and pressure or conflict with colleagues.

If you are self-harming:

If you are self-harming, first of all, be kind to yourself. You are not broken or alone for processing your difficult emotions this way. But we do hope that there is another way for you.

Some people stop self-harming without speaking with someone else, but for many, opening up to a trusted loved one is a necessary turning point for finding an alternative way of coping.

Some people decide to stop and do so quickly. For others it's a gradual journey that takes time. Whichever you are, it's ok, be kind to yourself and consider what support is best for you.

Some techniques that might help:

If you are working towards stopping or reducing your self-harm, the following might be useful:






- 1 Understanding self-harm triggers and patterns:** Do you have a clear sense of what causes you to self-harm, or want to? This could be specific places, people, thoughts, feelings or contexts. If you know what they are you may be able to consider how to mitigate their impact. You may also come to recognise physical and mental sensations that come before you self-harm such as an increased heart rate, strong and difficult feelings, or repetitive thoughts about self-harm. Keeping a diary to understand these patterns can help too.
- 2 Delaying self-harm:** Can you try to wait five minutes before you self-harm? If this feels impossible, can you start with one minute? This can be difficult but if you can slowly increase the time you wait you may be able to gradually build up the gaps between each time you harm yourself.
- 3 Can you find a way to soothe yourself?** There are techniques designed to soothe you and take the edge of intense urges to harm yourself. **distrACT** - an app which provides information and advice about self-harm - download for free on [Google Play](#) or [App Store](#). You can find a very practical list of ideas for soothing techniques and distraction, linked to the different reasons for self-harm, on the Mind website [here](#).


Longer term support:


Talking to someone is often the first step to changing your relationship with self-harm. It isn't easy to talk about self-harm, or the difficult experiences underpinning it, but it is often a crucial step towards feeling better supported and making long term change.


There are no rules about how you should talk about your self-harm - the most important thing is that you feel safe and comfortable.

If you decide you are going to talk to someone, you may find some of the following tips useful for your conversations:

-  **Find someone you can trust:** a friend, colleague, family member, GP or other trained health professional (you can also take someone with you to appointments).
-  **Right time or and place:** it may feel easier to write something down, talk online or make a phone call.
-  **Practise:** like with any difficult conversation, it may help to practise what you want to say first.
-  **Be as open and honest as you can:** try to talk as honestly and openly as you are able to. How are you feeling? What are your concerns? Would you like help and support? If so, what might that look like? But it's also fine if you don't have the answer to these questions.
-  **Prepare your listener:** depending on your relationship with the person you're talking to, you may want to prepare them, if you feel able. Let them know you're looking for support, first and foremost, but that what you're about to say might be surprising or shocking to them.

 **Set your own boundaries:** do not feel pressured into showing anyone your scars or injuries. You do not have to prove yourself in order to receive support. You might consider if it's helpful for a healthcare professional to see any injuries for treatment, however.

 **Let them ask you questions:** but do not feel you have to answer them all immediately. You can say "let me take that away to think about" or "I'm not comfortable answering that just yet".

 **Remember Education Support is here for you:** if you need support preparing for, or processing, a difficult conversation about your self-harm or anyone else's, you can call our helpline on **08000 562 561**.

Treatment:

You can get help by speaking to your GP. They may assess you and refer to specialist health professionals.

Talking therapies, involving talking with a professional, can be helpful for some people who self-harm. This might help you to create a regular and safe place to process your feelings.

Support groups may also help. These are regular meetings with other people who have similar experiences to you. They might help you if you feel isolated by your experiences.

Online support is an option if you don't feel ready to see someone face-to-face. There are a range of options in the list at the end of this document.

Treatment for scars and injuries may also help people on their recovery journey.



If you are concerned about a colleague who may be self-harming

Observing some of the symptoms or signs of self-harm mean they are definitely harming themselves. As a colleague, you can only identify patterns and inquire with kindness.

Spotting the signs:

People who self-harm may go to significant lengths to cover it up. Some of the signs of this you might observe are as follows:

- Unexplained cuts, scratches or bruises, usually on the arms, legs or chest
- Extreme clothing in hot weather, being covered up at all times
- Unexplained blood stains on tissues or clothing
- Extreme mood changes which likely mean becoming very withdrawn
- Changes in relationship dynamics and communication
- Changes in work performance
- Symptoms of depression or anxiety, such as low mood, lack of motivation
- Signs of low self-esteem or worthlessness
- Talking about ending things or not wanting to go on

Having a conversation:

If you think a colleague might be self-harming, you might decide to talk to them. If you do, prioritise finding a safe, private space and time to speak with them.

Be kind, and be clear that you are concerned. Be curious and make no judgements or assumptions. Make it clear that they have no obligation to share anything with you.

Your attitude and how you relate to the person you're talking to is one of the key things that can help them feel supported. **If you want your colleague to feel supported the following might help:**

- **Be supportive:** offer non-judgemental support that you are able to follow through on
- **Listen to the person:** everyone experiences self-harm differently. Listening to individual experiences is essential to being able to support someone properly
- **Signpost to support:** schools may have policies or support and adjustments already in place in relation to self-harm or wider mental health problems. If you know of them, point colleagues in the right direction. People can also be signposted to other sources of support (see section at the end of this document)
- **Don't assume anything:** try to understand what they are saying and let them be in control of the conversations and any outcomes from it



Dos and Don'ts for conversations with colleagues about self-harm:

✔ Do:

Encourage them to speak to a GP or free listening service about self-harm. Signpost to support. ✔

Consider that any amount of self-harm might be a sign that they're feeling extremely distressed. ✔

Try to understand their emotions and experiences, without judging them, rather than focusing on their self-harm. ✔

Be kind and curious. ✔

Ask how they would like to be supported. ✔

Let them be in control of their decisions, but get them medical attention if needed. ✔

Let them know you're there for them. ✔

Practice your own boundaries and self-care. This may be a difficult time for both of you. Make sure you only provide the type and amount of support you are able to. ✔

Have an honest conversation about how your colleague will stay safe - or ask them to have that conversation with a professional. ✔

Help them to see their self-harm as an ordinary problem that requires support and understanding, not as something secret and shameful. ✔

✘ Don't:

Label self-harm as 'attention seeking' or an extreme reaction to what they are experiencing. ✘

Act or threaten to act in a way that takes control away from the person. ✘

Feel responsible for their self-harm or become the person who is supposed to stop them. ✘

Try to force someone to stop self-harming or expect this to happen quickly. ✘

Ignore or focus too much on any injuries. ✘

Try to be their therapist — you can best help by being their colleague and friend. ✘

React strongly, with anger, hurt, or upset. This will probably make them feel even worse — and this makes it harder to change. ✘



What managers and school leaders can do:

The information above is for all staff and colleagues - school leaders and managers have a much bigger role to play in ensuring that self-harm is rightly approached as a workplace health issue.

How managers can support individuals:

All managers need to know about self-harm, and how they can support their staff if needed. If your school has a policy which covers guidance for managers in relation to self-harm and mental health make sure you know the policy, support available and can signpost staff to this. If your school doesn't have this, you can still provide appropriate support to anyone you manage in this position.

Remember that everyone is different and each person may need something slightly different to help them manage their experiences. If someone talks to you about self-harm use the information above to have a safe conversation. You may also want to ask them some of the following questions to ascertain what, if anything, can be done at school to help them:

- What do you need?
- What is making this harder for you at school?
- How can we remove barriers for you to get any support you would like?
- How can we support you?



Other ways you may be able to support staff include:

- Consider and remind them of their strengths and try to remove any significant hurdles they are experiencing in the short term
- Gently and without judgement or blame, offer an occupational therapy assessment
- Listen and encourage them to speak with you. Don't reference performance or capability procedures - this will only increase anxiety and stress levels
- Create an open culture in your team that enables discussion about mental health
- Be aware of how self-harm might affect appraisal or pay progression for teachers; consider adjusting objectives to take account of self-harm or mental health related absence or performance changes
- Educate yourself on self-harm and mental health and the reasonable adjustments required, and initiate conversations with staff about this

What school leaders can do:

All employers have a duty to minimise or remove workplace health and safety risks.

This includes making sure that workplaces and their practices do not lead to (or exacerbate) poor employee mental health that could result in self-harm. They have a duty to provide support and make changes to help any workers who are experiencing poor mental health or self-harm while doing their job.

It's not always easy for managers or school leaders to know the extent to which self-harm is affecting staff or the school. People understandably may not feel comfortable talking about it.



Normalising conversations about self-harm within a wider culture of openness about mental health and psychological safety, is an essential step for every school and education workplace.

Changes that are needed range from strategic, large-scale actions, to smaller, more practical things that can make a big difference to people experiencing self-harm.

Change and improve school culture:

- Raise awareness about self-harm, talk about it sensitively and bust the myths (use our mythbuster below). The goal is to create a workplace where people feel able to ask for advice and support about self-harm and all mental health concerns
- School leaders can talk openly about the desire to create a psychologically safe school
- Demonstrate support for those experiencing self-harm by supporting requests for counselling, other emotional support or reasonable work adjustments



Get policies right:



Write and implement a policy that takes account of self-harm.

- This could be part of your health and safety policy or a specific self-harm policy. It should follow the same consultation process as any other policy
- The policy should state:
 - What support is available for staff
 - Who may need it and how to access it,
 - Simple guidance for managers and team leaders

It could be a staff mental health safeguarding policy - you can find extensive guidance on writing one of these, and a template, [here](#).

- **Have champions across the school** for whichever policy you decide on, who make sure staff are aware of it. Have a senior leader championing it too
- **Embed the new policy within existing ones.** Link to and reference self-harm in the following policies if you have them:
 - Health and safety
 - Sickness absence
 - Performance management
 - Equality and diversity
 - Occupational health policies
- **Ensure that school risk assessments take account of self-harm.** Address any work related factors which cause it, and make adjustments that effectively remove or control risks

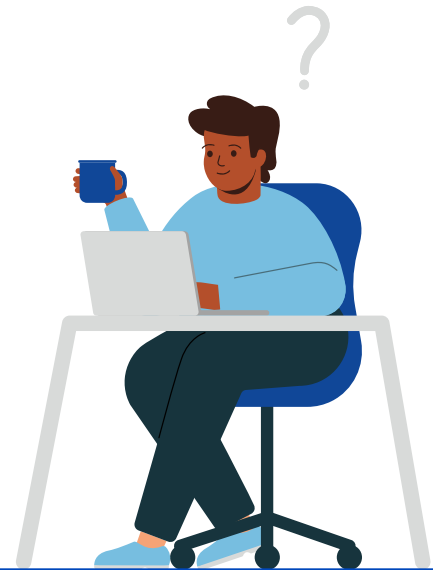
Improve awareness and understanding:

- Run mental health and self-harm training and awareness raising sessions across your school e.g. including it in CPD, making sure senior school leaders are visible improving their own awareness
- Provide points of contact who are available for people to go to for self-harm and mental health information
- You can find information about training on self-harm [here](#)

Appropriate absence and performance management:

- Manage absence and absence monitoring in a supportive and constructive way which recognises that self-harm is a long-term and significant issue
- Be aware of how self-harm might affect performance; consider adjusting objectives to take account of self-harm-related absence or where self-harm symptoms may have affected performance
- Be supportive of people who are absent for self-harm-related reasons, adjusting absence-monitoring. Remember that they are people, and colleagues who are experiencing mental health challenges

Mythbuster tool:



There are lots of myths attached to self-harm. Negative stereotypes can be powerful. By challenging them, we might make it easier for people to speak out and seek support.

These myths also mean that professionals, family and friends can misunderstand people who self-harm. Use these myths and realities to help your staff understand self-harm better.

Self-harm is a goth thing that young people do

Reality: Self-harm has been stereotyped to be seen as part of certain subcultures such as “goth” or “emo”. It can also be assumed to be only something young people do. There is little evidence supporting the belief that self-harm is part of any particular subculture or age group.

Only women and girls self-harm

Reality: It is often assumed that women and girls are more likely than to self-harm than men and boys. It isn't clear if this is true. People may engage with different self-harming behaviours or have different reasons for hurting themselves, but this doesn't make it any less serious.

People who self-harm must enjoy it

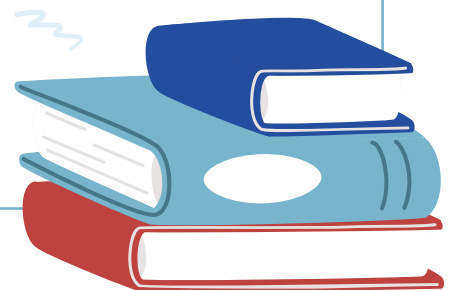
Reality: Some people believe that people who self-harm take pleasure in the pain or risk associated in the behaviour. There is no evidence that people who self-harm feel pain differently than anyone else. The harming behaviour often causes people great physical and emotional pain.

Self-harm is attention-seeking

Reality: One of the most common stereotypes is that self-harm is about ‘attention seeking’. This is not the case. Many people who self-harm don't talk to anyone about what they are going through for a long time and it can be very hard for people to find enough courage to ask for help. If self-harm is being used as a way of asking for attention please remember that there is nothing wrong with wanting attention — as humans, we all need connection. Deep distress can get in the way of someone's ability to be direct about what they need.

People who self-harm are suicidal

Reality: Self-harm is sometimes viewed as a suicide attempt by people who don't understand it. For many people self-harm is about trying to cope with difficult feelings and circumstances. Some people have described it as a way of staying alive and surviving these difficulties. However, some people who self-harm can feel suicidal and might attempt to take their own life, which is why it must always be taken seriously.



Getting help - further information and support



Education Support helpline: teachers and education shall can access immediate emotional support by calling 08000 562 561



CALM - online mental health web chat support for men



distrACT - an app which provides information and advice about self-harm - download for free on [Google Play](#) or [App Store](#)



Harmless - a user-led organisation supporting people who self-harm, friends and family



LifeSIGNS - user-led self-harm guidance and support network



Mind - [helplines](#) and email support service, [local Minds](#) providing face to face services across Wales and England, an online support community called [Side by Side](#)



National Self Harm Network (NSHN) a survivor-led online support forum for people who self-harm, their friends and families.



NHS - information on where to get help for self harm within the NHS and using other support services



Recover Your Life - a large online self harm support community



Samaritans 116 123 (freephone) or email jo@samaritans.org - 24/7 support lines for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some [Samaritans branches](#) in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm—11pm daily)



Sane - support and information for anyone affected by mental health problems



Self-injury Support - 0808 800 8088 (phone) 0780 047 2908 (text) Information and support for women and girls affected by self-harm, trauma and abuse

Sources:

1. <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/self-harm>
2. <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/self-harm/about-self-harm/>
3. <https://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/>
4. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/truth-about-self-harm>
5. <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/behaviours/self-harm/>
6. <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2011/08/23/what-can-you-do-if-a-colleague-self-harms/>
7. <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/7-dos-and-donts-when-an-employee-is-at-risk-for-self-harm/603208/>
8. https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Supporting_the_wellbeing_of_staff_working_with_self-harm_and_suicide_content_FINAL.pdf