

Deliberate Self-Harm

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Many young people have thoughts about hurting themselves and some actually do it. When someone wants to hurt themselves (but doesn't want to end their life), it's called deliberate self-harm (DSH). There are many ways that young people choose to hurt themselves. Common ways are cutting themselves with blades, glass or another sharp object; burning themselves; biting or picking at their skin; banging their head against the wall; or hitting themselves.

Why do young people want to hurt themselves?

- Self-harm is not about wanting to die or about wanting attention;
- Self-harm can be a way of coping with painful thoughts and feelings;
- Self-harm can give the person something else to focus on other than the thoughts and feelings that they find overwhelming;
- It can provide them with something "real" or physical to focus on, rather than thoughts and feelings which can be harder to understand or recognise;
- It can help ground someone when they are feeling "zoned out";
- It can help them express how they are feeling;
- It can help them feel in control when everything around them feels out of control;
- Self-harm often happens in private but sometimes it can be used to communicate high levels of distress.
- Self-harm can provide a sense of relief.

What can you do to help someone who self-harms?

- Don't get angry with them – many young people don't want to talk about their self-harm as others have got angry at them for doing it.
- Be non-judgemental – telling them "it's stupid" or that they "shouldn't be doing it" won't make them stop. It will probably make them feel worse and make them want to do it more.
- Don't force them to stop as it may be helping them cope and by forcing them to stop you may actually increase their risk of hurting themselves worse.
- Help them to work out how the self-harm helps them and try to find other ways that they can get that same feeling (e.g., if it relaxes them, can they do a relaxation technique? If it gives them a different sensation to focus on, can they find a different way to feel that"?)
- Help them develop and find ways to manage their feelings before they get overwhelmed so that they don't need to self-harm.
- Work with them to develop a plan to reduce their self-harm.
- Check about suicidal thoughts as they may also be having suicidal thoughts.

- Be validating and supportive of their feelings (see Validation resource for more information about this).

Things you might want to put in a plan to reduce self-harm

If you are working with a young person and they want to stop or cut down their self-harm, here are some things that you could talk to them about to help them.

- What are the triggers for self-harm?
- What are some things that the young person can do to make it harder for them to self-harm (e.g., how do they make it harder to find the things they use to self-harm; what can they do instead; how can they delay to act on the urges to self-harm)?
- What are the strategies they have they make them feel happier or more relaxed?

What are some strategies that other young people do rather than self-harm?

- Draw on themselves instead of harming themselves.
- Talk to someone who “gets it”.
- Writing or drawing about their feelings.
- Exercise.
- Gaming or reading a book.
- Yelling or screaming into a pillow.
- Doing relaxation or mindfulness.
- Crying.
- Squeezing ice cubes until they’ve melted or their hands have gone numb.
- Having a cold shower, going for a swim, or jumping in a cold pool.
- Eating something really spicy or really sour.

If you are concerned about a young person who you think might be self-harming, please contact your Clinical Advisor or help@twb.org.nz for more information and support

Helpful TWB resources

1. Working with young people to develop a coping plan
2. Keeping on top plan
3. Validation resource