

# Self-harm

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**Does harming yourself help you to feel calm or like you have released your emotions? Self-harm is the deliberate causing of pain or injury, such as cutting or hitting, in response to emotional pain. Self-harm should always be taken seriously, no matter how severe the injury is. It can also result in accidental death.**

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## What is self-harm?

Self-harm is any behaviour that involves the deliberate causing of pain or injury to oneself without an intention to die. Self-harm is usually a response to distress, whether it be from mental illness, trauma or psychological pain. Some people find that the physical pain helps provide temporary relief from the emotional pain. It can become a compulsive and dangerous activity, and requires careful professional help.

Self-harm can include cutting, burning or hitting oneself, binge-eating or starvation, or repeatedly putting oneself in dangerous situations. It can also involve abuse of drugs or alcohol, including overdosing on prescription medications. Self-harming is often done in secret and is most common in young people aged 11–25 years, where it is used as a way of coping, particularly where they have not learned or cannot use more helpful coping strategies.

## Why do people self-harm?

People who self-harm may do so for various reasons including; helping to:

- deal with or stop negative emotions or pain such as feeling hopeless, anxious or rejected
- release tension or a build-up of emotions
- relieve feelings of loneliness or isolation
- punish themselves for something they have done or something they perceived as their fault
- feel 'alive' or 'real', or to combat feelings of numbness
- feel more in control of their life
- communicate to people that they need some support when they feel unable to use words.

People who self-harm may not intend to end their lives; however, the consequences of their risky behaviour can be fatal, and it needs careful assessment and care by a health professional.



## Self-harm and suicide

One of the main predictors of suicide is a previous episode of self-harm. While it is common for people who self-harm to state that they have no intention of dying and that their self-harming behaviour is a coping strategy, the risk of accidental death is very real.

People who self-harm repeatedly, may find it becomes a compulsion that they cannot stop. This may lead to feelings of hopelessness and possible suicidal thoughts. Similarly, if self-injury does not relieve the tension or help control negative thoughts and feelings, the person may injure themselves more severely, or may start to believe they can no longer control their pain and may consider suicide. In addition, some people who self-harm do also experience thoughts of suicide. If this is the case, refer to suicide related factsheets at [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au) for more information.

## What help is available?

Depression and anxiety along with other mental health issues may impact upon a person's ability to cope with everyday pressures and as such, may lead them to engaging in self-harming behaviours as a way to manage their feelings. Treating underlying conditions is important so that alternative strategies can be learnt and emotions can be dealt with appropriately.

While some people are able to stop the behaviour by themselves, many people will require help from a health professional. A GP is a good place to start, and they can refer you to a psychologist. When seeking help, you may be required to detail the types of self-harming behaviour that you engage in and the length of time you have been self-harming, as well as the relief you get from the behaviour; so it may be helpful to think of these things prior to your appointment. Try keeping a journal where you note down the things that are going on for you when you self-harm.

**Because self-harming behaviour is risky and possibly life-threatening, do not hesitate to call emergency services on 000 if necessary.**



**Self-harm can be dangerous and scary, but help is available.**

## Tips for helping yourself

It can be hard for people who self-harm to stop it by themselves. That's why it's important to get further help if needed; however, the ideas below may be helpful to start relieving some distress:

- Delay — put off self-harming behaviours until you have spoken to someone.
- Distract — do some exercise, go for walk, play a game, do something kind for yourself, play loud music or use positive coping strategies.
- Deep breathing — or other relaxation methods.

You may find that some of these strategies work in some situations but not others, or you may find that you need to use a combination of these. It is important to find what works for you. Also, remember that these are not long term solutions to self-harm but rather, are useful short-term alternatives for relieving distress.

## How can I help someone who is self-harming?

People who self-harm may be secretive or feel ashamed about their behaviour but you can help by:

- encouraging the person to see a doctor or other health professional
- suggesting options for getting help and letting the person decide their own course of treatment
- asking the person if they have considered suicide — so that appropriate and immediate help can be sought
- contacting emergency services on 000 if you think the person is at risk of serious injury
- remembering that you can only do your best to encourage someone to get help and cannot stop someone from self-harming and it is not your responsibility when they do.

## DO'S and DON'TS when helping others

### DO:

- ✓ Remain calm and focus on supporting the person and helping him or her to find better ways to cope.
- ✓ Be non-judgmental and supportive.
- ✓ Listen to the person so they feel heard and supported.
- ✓ Help the person to find other coping strategies.
- ✓ Encourage the person to seek help.
- ✓ Suggest options for support but do not be forceful

### DON'TS:

- ✗ Panic or become angry.
- ✗ Reject the person or ignore the problem.
- ✗ Condone the self-injury.
- ✗ Give ultimatums.
- ✗ Pressure the person into any treatment they are not comfortable with.

## Where to go to for support?

In addition to mental health services you should try and talk to someone you trust — you don't have to go through this alone. Get help and support to stay alive — contact a helpline, your GP, a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, a hospital emergency department, minister, teacher or anyone you trust to keep you safe. If your life is in danger — call emergency services 000.

It can be very difficult to know what to do and how to cope, but help is available. Below are some of the places to go for information and support:

- **Contact Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or Online Crisis Support Chat (available nightly at [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au))
- **SANE Australia** — 1800 18 7263
- **headspace** — 1800 650 890
- **Kids Helpline** — 1800 551 800
- **Reach Out** — [www.au.reachout.com](http://www.au.reachout.com)

For local services and centres in your area, visit the Lifeline Service Seeker Directory at [www.lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au](http://www.lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au)

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**Help is available for self-harm —  
you don't have to cope with it on your own.**

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**Phone 13 11 14 | [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)**

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 (available 24/7) if you are feeling suicidal or in crisis or visit [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au) to connect online with our Crisis Support Chat (available nightly), find a range of other useful factsheets and to find local services in your area.

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