



EU funds
for Malta
2014-2020

Understanding

SELF-HARM

in young people

An introductory information booklet
about self-harm in young people
for parents and guardians

ankrayouth.org



What is self-harm?

Self-harm refers to people deliberately hurting their bodies without wanting to die by suicide. It is usually done in secret and on places of the body that may not be seen by others.

The most common type of self-harm is cutting, but there are many other types of self-harm. Self-harming behaviours can happen at any age, and are more common among youth than any other age group. The behaviour often starts in the preteen or early teen years. Self-harming behaviours happen equally in boys, girls and non-binary youth.

Some facts about self-harming activities

- They usually start in the adolescent or teen years and can carry on into adulthood.
- It's not uncommon for young persons to purposely harm themselves at least once.
- In early adolescence, girls are more likely than boys to harm themselves, but later on, males and females are at similar risk for self-harm.
- Self-harm is often done in secret, so friends and family may not know it's happening.

Different forms of self-harm

Common ways in which young people harm themselves include:

- cutting, scratching, biting or burning the skin
- hair pulling
- overdosing or poisoning, but not to lethal levels
- hitting the head or body against hard surfaces.



**People who self-harm
deliberately hurt their bodies
without wanting to die**

What causes one to self-harm?

While the root causes of self-harm are complex, one common thread is exposure to trauma – an often underlying source of anxiety, depression, substance abuse and other psychological conditions that increase the risk of self-injurious behaviour and suicide.

In general people self-harm as a way of coping. People often talk about harming themselves to relieve, control or express distressing feelings, thoughts or memories. The reasons people engage in acts of self-injury vary, but one of the most common ones is to try to help regulate overwhelmingly painful emotions, perhaps of deep sadness, intense fear, rage or self-loathing. The act of something like self-cutting or hair pulling can provide a temporary emotional release, distraction from pain, or sense of greater aliveness by de-numbing. But, this 'remedy' obviously comes with great cost.

Some people harm themselves because they feel alone, while others do so to punish themselves due to feelings of guilt or shame. However, the relief they experience after self-harming is only short term and at some point the difficult feelings usually return. With the return of these feelings often comes an urge to self-harm again. This cycle of self-harm is often difficult to break.

Most people who self-harm are not trying to kill themselves, but there's a chance that they may hurt themselves more than they intended to; this increases their risk of accidental suicide. People who repeatedly self-harm may also become suicidal and feel hopeless and trapped.

The impulse youngsters feel to harm themselves is commonly triggered by a specific event in their life. A common "trigger" for cutting is feeling rejected by a partner, close friends, or by a general feeling of being left out or criticized.

Cutting can also be copy-cat behavior inspired by videos and images that show other youths cutting.

Self-harm can also occur for people experiencing a mental health condition, such as anxiety and depression.

Common causes include:

- Hurting the body "outside" can shift the attention from painful emotions "inside."
- Feeling emotionally numb or disconnected from inner feelings can push a person to want to feel "something," even physical pain.
- If a person is feeling unworthy or guilty (with or without a reason), self-harm can sometimes be a form of self-punishment.
- It can provide a sense of control.
- It can be a way of letting others know that something is wrong.

Recognising self-harming behaviour

While there can be obvious signs that your child is self-harming, such as exposed cuts and burns, there are some less obvious signs that they may be self-harming.

What causes my child to self-harm?

Any number of different factors in life can create distress that might lead your child to harm themselves.

Some factors are social or situational, for example:

- difficult relationships with family or friends
- problems at school or work, including bullying
- problems at home or family breakup
- dealing with homophobia or racism.

Some risk factors are more emotional and personal:

- feeling empty, disconnected, isolated
- experiencing anxiety, anger or depression
- a history of trauma or abuse
- a family history of self-harm.

Signs of self-harming behaviour

Look out for unusual marks on your child. Unexplained scars, cuts or even swelling from possibly punching something, can be a sign of a mental health problem. This may become evident if your child declines physical examinations and starts to cover up more.

Other signs include dramatic changes in mood, being secretive, avoiding situations where they have to expose arms or legs, strange excuses for injuries and withdrawing from usual life. However, many of these signs could also be due to a range of other issues or difficulties.

If you suspect that your child may be hurting themselves but you're not sure, look for these signs:

- Talking about self-injury
- Suspicious-looking scars
- Wounds that don't heal or get worse
- Cuts on the same place
- Increased isolation
- Collecting sharp tools such as shards of glass, safety pins, nail scissors, etc.
- Wearing long-sleeved shirts in warm weather
- Avoiding social activities
- Wearing a lot of band aids
- Refusing to go into the locker room or change clothes in school



How can I help my child?

If you discover that your child has been hurting themselves, even if they say it was a one-time thing, it's important to get help. It's true that young people might experiment with self-injury, especially if they have friends who are doing it, but it's a serious and dangerous behavior, and you don't want to ignore what might be a real mental health issue.

Listen

By listening you can begin to understand what is happening and why. Be open to hearing what is happening without judgement and with respect. Try to remain calm even though that may not be how you feel. It is common to feel confused, angry, scared and frustrated by what is going on. Offer support.

Be there for them

Let your child know you are there for them. You might find it hard to understand but you can support them. Be realistic; self-harming can take a while to stop. Encourage them when you notice that they have coped with difficult things without self-harming and help them to achieve the goals they set for themselves.





Help your child identify triggers

Help your child try to identify their triggers for self-harm and the early warning signs of becoming distressed. These could include:

- Pacing
- Chewing their sleeve
- Isolating themselves in their room

Come up with signals as a means of communication

Ask your child how you as a parent/guardian can help if they are having self-harm thoughts. Consider if there is a signal that they may be willing to give you when they spot their early warning signs of distress. This could include:

- Squeezing your hand
- Asking you to carry out a specific form of distraction with them
- Giving you a red card or a text with a code word

Young people sometimes find this easier than vocalising how they are feeling. Ask them how they would want you as parents or guardians to react if they give this signal. If they know you will not overreact, they are more likely to access their help.

Support your child in a way that works for both of you

It is possible to learn to manage really intense feelings in ways that do not cause harm, and many of these alternatives can also offer your child relief in the longer term. It can be hard, and at times confronting to break free from self-harming habits, but this is not a quick process. Your child's first step is to decide that they want things to be different; that they want a longer term solution to how to cope. Some people can begin this process on their own but many need the support of their friends and family.

Decide how you can support them in a way that works for both of you. You might help them to strengthen their problem-solving skills, enable them to do more of the things they enjoy or help them to identify the things that make them feel better.

Help your child make a plan for when they feel like self-harming

You can help your child to:

- Recognise when they do and don't self-harm
- Set realistic goals
- Learn to change their focus and try to find more options for how to think about things that is more positive and helpful. The change in how they think about things can also help how they will feel about things
- Support them to find helpful ways to express themselves – encourage them not to build up worries, anger or disappointments but to talk about them instead, with people that they trust.

Introduce self-help techniques

You can help introduce techniques that replace self-harm with something less harmful, such as:

- Holding ice cubes in their hand – cold causes pain but is not dangerous to their health.
- Wearing a rubber band on their wrist and snap it when they feel the need.
- Using a red pen to draw on the areas they might normally cut.
- Work it off with exercise.
- Scribble with red pen on a piece of paper.
- Deep breathing and relaxation exercises.
- Focusing on something around them, something simple, watching it for a while and see if that can distract them from the negative thoughts.
- Talk with someone.



Common reactions to avoid

Self-harm is a sign that a person is in distress. Approaching your child with compassion versus judgement and criticism may help.

Anyone can self-harm and for some it's a one-time-only event. But for others, it continues over time and grows into a habit that's hard to change. **While self-harm is an attempt to cope and is not usually a suicide attempt, those who injure themselves are at higher risk for suicide. So, any self-harming activity is a warning sign that something is wrong. Don't ignore it.**

Encourage your child to seek help – have the conversation

If you are worried about your child let them know and talk about it with them. Encourage them to seek professional help. Offer to help to organise an appointment or go with them if they would find this useful. Support services are available online, in person or over the phone.

Talk about it. Talk openly about your concerns. It can be a hard conversation at first so approach it with care, respect and without judgment. If they do not want to talk try again another time or suggest other people that they may be able to confide in.

Learn more about self-harm online or from your local doctor/health professionals.

Help them stay safe. Be realistic about change. You can't stop someone from self-harming. They need to first find other ways to cope, but this can take time. In the meantime help them to look after themselves as best they can.

Ask if they have thought about suicide. Talking about suicide does not create extra stress but instead gives them a chance to talk openly about it. If they have made plans to end their life, help them stay safe. Let them talk about how they feel and why. Encourage them to see their doctor, call Richmond's 1770 Helpline, or chat with a professional on www.olli.chat or www.kellimni.com to make a plan to keep them safe and feel supported.

Seek Help

If the person is planning suicide right away, it is an emergency: call 112 or take the person to the Emergency Department.

If the person is suicidal, but the risk isn't high right now, contact Richmond's Helpline on 1770.

If the self-harm injuries are severe, help them get medical attention.

Look after yourself

It can be overwhelming and distressing to know someone you care about is self-harming. To look after others you need to also look after yourself – try to get enough sleep, keep fit and healthy, and seek your own support from friends or professionals.

What sort of treatments can my child get?

Many people who self-harm don't have a mental illness. But some people self-harm as a result of a mental illness. That's why it's important to determine whether your child is experiencing any other symptoms, like troubling thoughts or feelings. If self-harm is related to an illness, treating that illness can reduce the thoughts or feelings that lead to self-harm.

The following treatments may be helpful on their own or as part of your child's treatment plan:

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT teaches your child how their thoughts and behaviours affect their mood. This may be particularly helpful for young people who self-harm because it may reduce the feelings that trigger self-harm.

CBT works to change their thoughts and behaviour by teaching them to think rationally about common difficulties, helping them to shift negative or unhelpful thought patterns and reactions to a more realistic, positive and problem-solving approach.

This helps improve anxiety, depression, self-esteem, problem-solving skills and coping skills in young people who self-harm.

Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)

DBT teaches ways to replace extreme and rigid ways of thinking with more open and flexible ways of thinking. It also teaches skills like acceptance and problem-solving, and can teach your child how to cope with uncomfortable or difficult thoughts, feelings and situations.

There are five modules of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy skills, which also correspond to five areas that youth often struggle with:

1. Emotion regulation

Navigating up-and-down emotions.

2. Interpersonal effectiveness

Managing relationships appropriately.

3. Distress tolerance

Tolerating difficult emotions safely and reducing suffering through reality acceptance.

4. Core Mindfulness

Increasing one's awareness and focus in the present moment.

5. Walking the middle path

Finding balance between two extremes.



Self-help

Regular exercise, eating well, getting enough sleep, staying in touch with family and friends, joining a support group and doing enjoyable things are some ways that can improve anyone's mental health. It may be helpful to find other healthier ways to cope that work for your child, like talking to friends, writing in a journal or practicing relaxation exercises. It's also a good idea to avoid any media (like TV shows or movies) that makes self-harm look glamorous or 'cool'.

Other services

The "CALMHARM" app. This app is a good option for distraction when your child is feeling distressed.

Richmond services. You can also give your child the number for Richmond's Helpline, 1770. They can call this number at any time or go to Richmond's support webchat www.ollie.chat if they are feeling distressed.

Be part of reducing the stigma towards mental health.

A key element in reducing stigma related to mental health is for everyone within the community to have a good understanding of it – that is, improving our mental health literacy.

There are three key elements to mental health literacy:

- **knowledge of signs and symptoms of poor mental health**
- **knowledge of prevention and management techniques**
- **knowledge of how to support others**

It is important that we all play our part in challenging any misconceptions around anxiety with the intention to bring perceptions in line with reality.

Useful support:

www.oli.chat

Richmond's free, 24/7 webchat offering emotional support and practical guidance.

kellimni.com

A free, 24/7 support service managed by SOS Malta.

Aġenzija Żgħażaġh

Provides youths with a safe space to express views, needs and concerns.

Youth in Focus Service

Provides social work intervention to adolescents and young persons.

ANKRA is a project set up by Richmond for young people affected by mental health problems in Malta.

We are here to provide help, information and support.

Helpline: **1770**

Helpchat: **www.oli.chat**

info@ankrayouth.org

ankrayouth.org



**SUPPORTING
MENTAL WELLBEING
IN YOUTHS**



Operational Programme II – European Structural and Investment Funds 2014-2020
'Investing in Human Capital to Create More Opportunities and Promote the Well-being of Society'
Project part-financed by the European Union European Social Fund (ESF)
Co-financing rate: 80% European Union; 20% Richmond Foundation Funds

