



EU funds
for Malta
2014-2020

SELF-HARM

IN YOUNG PEOPLE

What you need to know

ankrayouth.org



Self-harm in young people

The term self-harm is used to describe what people do when they deliberately hurt or injure themselves, often as a way to cope with painful or intensely difficult feelings. Self-harm can include a range of self-injurious behaviours like cutting, burning or punching the body.

There are many reasons why young people harm themselves and for some young people it may be difficult to put the reasons into words. These actions may provide temporary relief but they do not help to solve the problem underlying your distress.

Sometimes it can feel like life is just too hard and problems can seem overwhelming. Thoughts of self-harm are not uncommon but there are other things that you can do to cope with really distressing times. It's important to sort out the underlying problem – whether it is anxiety, depression or something else. If you are hurting yourself or thinking about suicide you need to let someone know, and get some help to cope.

Self-harm/self-injury might be part of your experience now but it does not have to be in the future – you can learn to care for yourself emotionally and physically. Changing your self-harming habits is about learning to cope with your urges to self-harm, identifying new ways to express how you feel, having the right support and improving your general health and wellbeing.

Some people have described self-harm as a way to:

- express something that is hard to put into words
- turn invisible thoughts or feelings into something visible
- change emotional pain into physical pain

- reduce overwhelming emotional feelings or thoughts
- have a sense of being in control
- escape traumatic memories
- have something in life that they can rely on
- punish themselves for their feelings and experiences
- stop feeling numb, disconnected or dissociated
- create a reason to physically care for themselves
- express suicidal feelings and thoughts without taking their own life.

After self-harming you may feel a short-term sense of release, but the cause of your distress is unlikely to have gone away. Self-harm can also bring up very difficult emotions and could make you feel worse.



Finding other ways to cope

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 you relief in the longer term. It can be hard, and at times confronting to break free from your self-harming habits, but just take it one step at a time.

Your first step is to decide that you want things to be different; that you want a longer term solution to how you cope. Some people can begin this process on their own but many need the support of their friends and family.

Recognise when you do and don't self-harm

- Learn more about your habits. Identify the usual times, places and feelings that trigger your self-harm.
- Try to make an effort to do more of the things that make you feel better and help you stop self-harming.
- Consider keeping a journal to track your habits.

Set realistic goals

- Set yourself realistic goals to work towards and reward all your achievements, even the small ones.
- Be kind to yourself; giving up self-harm and trying new ways to cope takes time.
- Consider using a problem-solving approach when problems arise

Learn to change your focus

- Try to find some alternative options for how to think about things that are more helpful or positive. This change in how you think about things can also change how you feel. For example, try to avoid

“Everything is terrible and nothing will ever change”, but instead “That was a really horrible experience but hopefully it won't happen again”.

- Do something different when the self-harming thoughts return, such as taking some deep breaths, or having a shower. Other options to try might include holding ice cubes in your hand, snapping a rubber band on your wrist, exercising, eating a chilli, or talking to someone. Often the urge to self-harm will lessen after a period of time.
- Develop your mindfulness and relaxation skills. This might mean listening to music, going for a brisk walk or run, or doing some guided relaxation or mindfulness exercises. There are many online programs and other helpful apps that you could try like Calm Harm
- Remind yourself of your positive skills and work to keep building on these strengths.

Find helpful ways to express yourself

- Talk openly to people you trust to get their understanding and support.
- Don't build up worries, anger or disappointments – talk about them.

Get support

- Find a health professional in person, online or over the phone.
- Persevere. It can take a while before you notice the benefits.

Look after yourself

- Look after your health – eat well, exercise and try to have a regular sleeping habit. Spend time doing things that you enjoy, with people you enjoy being with.
- Avoid or try limiting the amount of alcohol or drugs you use as they

- often make you feel worse.
- Think about what to do and who you can call in emergencies.
- Look after your injuries – bandage and clean your injuries to avoid infection.
- If your thoughts change from wanting to harm yourself to being hopeless and thinking about suicide, talk to someone about it.

Effective therapies for self-harm will help to:

- Identify what triggers cause you to self-harm
- Improve problem solving so that you can manage stressful situations more effectively
- Learn to control your emotions and find healthier ways to handle them

- Change unhealthy thoughts and replace them with more positive ones
- Boost your people skills to help resolve conflicts and get support from others.

Some of the more effective talking therapies are **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**, **Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT)** and **Problem Solving Therapy (PST)**.

Giving up self-harm and trying new ways to cope takes time and patience but you will begin to see that you don't have to hurt yourself to feel better; there are other ways.



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

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.

