

# OUT OF HARM TOOLKIT

WELCOME TO THE OUT OF HARM TOOLKIT. THIS IS A RESOURCE FOR FAMILY, TEACHERS AND OTHER PROFESSIONALS WHO HAVE CONTACT WITH A YOUNG PERSON THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT.

This Toolkit resource is a work in progress; we aim to research and update as appropriate and therefore it is subject to change and development.

It has been created in response to research demonstrating that teachers and health professionals interviewed showed little confidence in their understanding of self-harm and were concerned that they did not know what language to use when talking to a young person about self-harm. (1)

The aim of this resource is not to teach you everything you need to know about self-harm, but instead to build confidence in approaching the issue with young people and laying the foundations for learning more about an individual's experiences.

Depending on your personal experience, it could be that someone else may be best to have the conversation with the young person you are concerned about to keep yourself safe.

**If you are a young person who is self-harming and would like to have a conversation with an adult you trust, you could give them this resource and that could help prepare them to chat to you about it.**



# WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is highly stigmatised and regarded as a taboo subject. There is a lot of fear and ignorance surrounding it with many people not knowing about the different types of self-harm and responding to it from a place of fear. Young people don't want to tell anyone they're self-harming because they're scared the adult they tell will be angry at them, tell them to stop, ask to see the self-harm and miss the point completely.

This link to a page on the Childline website (see links section) offers clear, concise information on what self-harm is and how it is different from being suicidal.

This resource adopts in line with current guidelines a harm reduction approach. **(2)** This means that we accept that self-harm is a symptom and coping strategy of emotional distress, rather than a problem itself. It also means that we do not make demands on young people to stop self-harming before they are ready to do so.

Self-harm is very common, it may be that you or someone close to you has experience of self-harm. Get some support for yourself if you are finding any of the content of this toolkit distressing. There is a list of support services contained in the Links section.

## REFERENCES

**(1.)** Talking Self Harm, a study conducted by Young Minds and Cello Group, can be accessed at [www.cellogroup.com/pdfs/talking\\_self\\_harm.pdf](http://www.cellogroup.com/pdfs/talking_self_harm.pdf)

**(2.)** NICE guideline CG16 on Self harm, state that for individuals who repeatedly self harm (excluding poisoning) that one should "consider giving advice and instructions on harm minimisation issues and techniques".



## TALKING ABOUT SELF HARM

## ADOPTING THE MINDSET

Talking about self-harm can be hard and it can make you feel frustrated, helpless, angry and sad. Remember, everyone makes mistakes, don't be afraid of 'doing it wrong'; doing something to help is better than doing nothing at all. Try to revisit these points, from the organisation Head above the Waves, to prepare you for your conversation:

**Take care of yourself** – To support someone as they're beating their struggle with self-harm can be difficult emotionally, so make sure you seek support if you need it.

**Let them lead** – they're going to make progress at their own pace. Let them set their own goals, or make their own decisions about the support that they want. Let them know that you care, and want to help. Ask them how you can help.

**Don't take things personally** – these are their issues. It's good they trust you enough to share them with you.

**Be realistic** – You can't solve all their problems by yourself. But do what you can, even if that's just being there to listen.

**Be patient** – Stopping self-harm will only happen in their own time. Don't try and force them to stop, as this just encourages negative emotion. Let them know you're there for them, as and when they're ready to talk.

**Stay calm** – It's understandable that you may be angry and upset that someone close to you hurts themselves. But being visibly angry can make the situation worse, and leave them feeling like they can't talk to you.

See the links section for the original resource.

## UNDERSTANDING TRIGGERS

Many people worry that talking about self-harm will encourage the behaviour, or 'trigger' it. If you keep your language person centred and focus on the emotional distress a young person is experiencing, rather than the harm itself, you can limit this risk.

Triggering is a term used to describe when something, a trigger, causes a negative emotional response. This emotional response can be fear, sadness, panic, flashbacks or pain, as well as any physical symptoms associated with these emotions; shaking, loss of appetite, fainting, fatigue, and so on. In the case of self-harm it may be that a trigger makes a person feel like they want to hurt themselves.

People who self-harm have their own triggers, you won't be able to predict these or avoid them all but it is good practice to avoid the following things in your discussions about self-harm:

- 🗨 **Detailed descriptions of other people's self-harm**
- 🗨 **Numbers, measurements or scales of harm, particularly in comparison to others**
- 🗨 **Images of self-harm**

## EQUIP YOURSELF WITH THE LANGUAGE - THE CONVERSATION GUIDE

The **Conversation Guide**© aims to provide the words that will be most helpful and supportive, allowing the young person to feel that they've done the right thing by telling someone about what's happening for them. Something that will aid the adult in assisting them but without leaving either of them feeling vulnerable. In creating the Conversation Guide, it was important to avoid a counselling language. We didn't want the adult to venture into territory that was going to get complicated, unsafe or open conversations that they would find they couldn't support. Therefore, the Guide is primarily about empathising, reassuring, praising and looking at the next steps.

This is an area that is often brought up as a challenge; how to talk about self-harm itself. General advice is keeping your language person centred, avoiding words like 'cutter' or 'self-harmer' and instead focussing on the person first.

People self-harm in many ways. To avoid creating hierarchies of harm, or triggering a young person, it is best to discuss the impact it has on them personally; if they consider that 'they hurt themselves' then this constitutes self-harm. You can begin exploring the details later in your conversation once you are both comfortable and have set your boundaries.

## CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE TIME

Talking and thinking about self-harm can be a big deal for anyone. Find a time and place that's right for both of you, somewhere you won't be distracted and at a time you can give them your full attention and where it is private and comfortable.





## STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Set ground rules and clarify that this is a private conversation and that you will not share what they tell you without their permission, unless they are at risk. This confidentiality will depend on your child protection policy.

See confidentiality in the Conversation Guide.

It is important to remember that self-harm does not necessarily mean someone feels suicidal and therefore the risk level can be much lower.

If they are unsure about disclosing self-harm in the first conversations, then do not push for disclosure even if you are certain about the harm. Instead, see this conversation as a first step on a journey towards disclosure and focus on how the young person is feeling and coping.

If the young person naturally leads the conversation, that is great and aim to follow their natural flow. If the young person is less certain about navigating the conversation, the notion of “respectful curiosity” can be a helpful model to follow. This is best described as a state of awareness characterized by a genuine curiosity and willingness to know and understand, in combination with attention to assuring that one’s curiosity is satisfied in a kind and respectful way. This is shown in the language used in our Conversation Guide.

It is productive to focus first on helping the young person to express their experience and feelings, this is a key step toward recovery. Take time to observe what you are feeling and thinking. If you notice that you feel judgmental or angry it would be better to get some space and come back to the conversation when you feel calmer.

As an adult listening to a young person who is self-harming, it is good to remember: **I didn't cause it, I can't control it and I can't cure it.**

## BRINGING THE CONVERSATION TO A CLOSE



As the conversation ends acknowledge how brave the young person has been in discussing their emotions with you. Work together to consider how you want to move forward.

Ask them what help they would like and what they want you to do for them. Help them to find support projects and phone numbers if they give permission to do so. Seek further help when necessary, but be honest about it and let them know what you're doing.

Acknowledge that the self-harm is serving a need for that person. Although it may be tempting, do not to make demands or create ultimatums about stopping in the future, this can be problematic if a young person cannot stick to the plan and places a lot of pressure on them. If someone is talking about stopping, you can acknowledge how frightening it may feel to give something up that they have relied on for some time.

Acknowledge that this is the beginning of a conversation and that this is not a one-off discussion. Discuss how you will follow up and even schedule another chat there and then or work out a system for them to let you know. In future conversations continue with the model we have given in the Conversation Guide©

## WHEN THE YOUNG PERSON HAS LEFT THE CONVERSATION

Take time to congratulate yourself on having a conversation that a lot of people would find very difficult and may avoid altogether. Acknowledge that it is the first step on a journey to recovery. Depending on the situation and your organization’s child protection policy you may need to feedback on your conversation to others and it is recommended you do get some supervision and support for yourself.

## HELPFUL LINKS

### SCOTLAND

Time and Space	Support group for women affected by self-harm which offers peer support, one-to-one support and person-centered counselling.	<a href="mailto:info@timeandspace.org.uk">info@timeandspace.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.timeandspace.org.uk">www.timeandspace.org.uk</a>
Penumbra	Community based services that work with young people and adults who self-harm or are at risk of suicide. Penumbra also provide emotional support for the families and carers of those who self-harm.	<a href="mailto:enquiries@penumbra.org.uk">enquiries@penumbra.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.penumbra.org.uk">www.penumbra.org.uk</a>
Life Link	LifeLink is a Glasgow based organisation providing one to one support, assessment and onward referrals; information on harm minimisation/training on wound dressing; counselling and massage therapy on site and support for family, friends and carers.	<a href="http://www.lifelink.org.uk/youth/">www.lifelink.org.uk/youth/</a>
Mind's Well	Minds Well run workshops about self-harm and have resources about self harm. Mind's Well has a list of books, articles and other materials that are helpful to find more information about self-harm	<a href="mailto:info@mindswell.org.uk">info@mindswell.org.uk</a> <a href="http://www.mindswell.org.uk">www.mindswell.org.uk</a>
Breathing Space	A confidential phonenumber for anyone in Scotland feeling low, anxious or depressed.	<a href="http://www.breathingspace.scot">www.breathingspace.scot</a>

### THE UK

Self-Injury Support	Women's Self Injury Helpline - UK-wide helpline for women of any age and their friends, families and carers. Worthwhile resources that would be suitable for men too.	<a href="http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk">www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk</a>
NSHN	National Self Harm Network, a forum for people who experience self harm.	<a href="http://www.nshn.co.uk">www.nshn.co.uk</a>
Childline	Childline is there to help anyone under 19 in the UK with any issue they're going through online and on their helpline. There is a section on on self-harm, a forum for young people experiencing self-harm and a mood journal.	<a href="http://www.childline.org.uk">www.childline.org.uk</a>
Lifesigns	Small nationwide charity creating understanding about self-injury through information and peer education online.	<a href="http://www.lifesigns.org.uk">www.lifesigns.org.uk</a>
Young Minds	Nationwide mental health charity - large section on website about self harm	<a href="http://www.youngminds.org.uk">www.youngminds.org.uk</a>

# TALKING ABOUT SELF HARM: A CONVERSATION GUIDE

It takes a lot of courage for someone to disclose this kind of information. Take it slowly, offer praise and encouragement and err on the side of silence if you are unsure what to say. Remember not to confuse the risk of self-harm with suicide, and don't break confidentiality if there is no risk to the young person's life, and not without talking about it with them first.

## 1. OPENING UP

Start here if you are concerned about a young person and are initiating the chat

- ☞ You look upset/sad/angry
- ☞ It looks like something has been bothering /upsetting you and I was wondering if you can tell me what's been happening for you?
- ☞ Sometimes when people feel overwhelmed they don't know how to cope. Is this something that has ever happened to you?
- ☞ I know that some young people self-harm as a way of coping, is this something that you have thought about?

If young person doesn't disclose self-harm at this point, thank them for talking to you and reassure them that you are there if they need someone to talk to in the future. Refer to stage 5 if it feels appropriate.

## 4. EXPLORING

- ☞ What was it that made you want to tell me this today?
- ☞ What are your hopes for telling me this?
- ☞ What else do you do that helps you get through the day?
- ☞ That's great you're able to do those things too.
- ☞ It looks like self-harming is your main way of coping right now.
- ☞ Talking to me about this tells me you want some help and that's really good
- ☞ This is your first step towards getting the support you need.

## 2. ACKNOWLEDGING

Start here if a young person discloses their self harm to you

- ☞ Thank you for telling me that
- ☞ I believe you (young person may feel they will not be believed)
- ☞ I care about you and I'm here for you
- ☞ I can't imagine how you're feeling
- ☞ I know that some young people self-harm as a way of coping
- ☞ It takes a lot of courage to tell me that, you've done really well
- ☞ It sounds like things are hard for you
- ☞ I'd really like to support and understand you more

## 5. CLOSING

- ☞ I'm here for you and I want to get you the right help.
- ☞ What would you like to happen now that you've told me this?
- ☞ How would you feel about me getting you some help?
- ☞ I want you to know there is support out there for you
- ☞ Is there anything you can think of that might help you?

## 3. CONFIDENTIALITY

Bring this up when it feels right

- ☞ I'm not going to share what you tell me with anyone else unless you want me to, or you tell me something that makes me think you are at risk or another person is at risk.
- ☞ I would want to get you some help but we can talk about how best we can do that in a way that will make you feel safe.

You may find it appropriate to schedule another chat there and then but ideally it will be to lead them to the next level of appropriate support.