

Boys and self-harm: facts and tips

Recent figures suggest that rates of self-harm among young boys may be on the rise. In 2013-2014, 659 boys went to hospital with self-harm injuries, an increase of more than 30% on the figure for just four years earlier. The majority of young people admitted to hospital for self-harm are still girls (5955¹), but experts are warning against assuming that self-harm is a problem that only affects young women - especially as it isn't always diagnosed in boys. (The more we think boys don't self-harm, the less likely we are to spot it when it happens...)

We've assembled these tips to help parents understand and deal with this complex issue:

The facts

- Boys are less likely to report having a problem and so are less likely to receive support and treatment.
- The ways in which boys and girls generally experience self-harm may vary. Boys might hit or punch themselves or hit objects, for instance, to deal with their emotions. These are all examples of self-harm, but hospitals and professionals might not always categorise them like that – which can lead to underreporting of self-harm by boys.

How you can help

- Discovering a young person you care about – boy or girl – is self-harming is frightening and incredibly worrying, particularly if you have no previous knowledge of self-harming. The first thing to remember is to try to stay calm. Try not to jump to conclusions about what lies behind it.
- When we think about the warning signs of self-harm, it's often the physical things that come to mind. Unexplained cuts, bruises, burns and other injuries may all be a sign that a person is self-harming, as might always wearing clothes that fully cover their body. But there are a number of emotional and behavioural warning signs too: low self-esteem, decreased motivation, relationship problems and wanting to be alone more than usual could all indicate that something is wrong.

What to do

It can be really difficult when you discover that a child you care about is self-harming, but fortunately there are several ways to help. Speaking to your GP can be a good first step – GPs can provide treatment and referrals to specialists, and should be used to discussing sensitive medical issues. You or your child may also be able to call an anonymous helpline to speak to a professional if it's too difficult to have the conversation face to face.

In today's digital world, when parents discover a serious issue with their children, it can be tempting to assume their online activities are to blame and to demand access to their accounts and devices to see what they've been up to online. They may in fact be supporting their activities through forums and online discussion groups. But it's almost never the case that the online activities are the cause of the behaviour and experts say surveillance of young people's digital lives is not effective and may actually make the situation worse. Emphasising trust and communication with your child is likely to be more effective.

Helplines and resources:

Parents and any adult worried about a young person can call YoungMinds' free and confidential [Parents' Helpline](#) (link is external) to speak to a trained advisor.

There are a number of places young people can turn if they're in need of support:

<http://www.mind.org.uk/> (link is external) - The Mind Infoline can be called or texted and provides confidential information on mental health.

papyrus-uk.org (link is external) – Papyrus provides support for anyone dealing with suicide, depression or emotional distress, especially young people.

getconnected.org (link is external) – Get Connected is a confidential national helpline that can put young people in touch with helpful resources when they don't know where to turn.

TheSite.org (link is external) – TheSite is a source of advice and information for young people in the UK on a range of topics.