

What to do if your child is self-harming

Finding out your child is self-harming is very upsetting and can stir up a range of emotions. Here, YoungMinds, The Charlie Waller Memorial Trust and The Royal College of Psychiatrists give their advice on how to cope if you discover that your child is self-harming, based on conversations with real parents who have gone through it too. Go to the [Young Minds](#) website to find out more.

'Having found out my child was self-harming I was so devastated and confused as to why. My emotions were all over the place, not knowing how to help her, where to go for professional help - it was so stressful. As a father I just wanted to wrap her up in cotton wool.'

What you're feeling

If you've recently discovered that your child is harming themselves then you're probably experiencing a whole range of emotions. Parents commonly talk of guilt, shame, anger, frustration, sadness and disgust.

Self-harm is a common coping mechanism for young people who turn to it as quickly as other generations might have used drugs or alcohol to manage difficult feelings. It can be a reflection of a broad range of issues, most of which are unrelated to your parenting.

However, as a parent you're in a great position to support your child's recovery. Acknowledge your feelings, perhaps by talking to a partner, friend or counsellor. Try not to focus on the past, instead think about how you can help make things change.

Many parents grow closer to their children as they support their recovery.

'Looking back, that time feels like a gift; we went from strangers to friends – we built a bridge of trust.'

What to say

Many parents find themselves paralysed with fear of saying the wrong thing to their child and so they say nothing at all. One time you should

say nothing is if your emotions are running high – then it’s best to give yourself space and time to calm. The rest of the time, even if you don’t get it quite right, each conversation is a show of support for your child.

Young people shared their tips with us on how parents can get it right:

- **Try not to judge:** 'My parents didn't like it but they didn't think it made me a bad person.'
- **Be honest:** 'My parents told me they didn't get it. Nor did I. Their honesty and questions helped me to open up about it.'
- **Accept recovery as a process:** 'I can't stop. Not right now. If you ask me to, I'll feel like I'm letting you down. It's going to take time.'
- **Listen:** 'My dad said very little. He just listened. It was exactly what I needed.'
- **Talk about other things too:** 'I'm more than my self-harm. It doesn't have to be the focus of every conversation.'

What to do

There are many practical ways in which you can support your child's recovery. The journey is different for everyone, but things that can commonly help include:

- **Supporting your child in accessing professional support:** A visit to the GP or talking to someone at school is often the best first step.
- **Learning more about self-harm:** There is a lot of misunderstanding around self-harm, the better you understand it, the better you can support your child. Further sources of support can be found at the bottom of this page.
- **Identifying stressors and triggers:** Talk through a typical day or upcoming events with your child. Identify situations that are worrying them and discuss how to best address these.
- **Helping your child learn about alternatives:** Work with your child to identify different ways of dealing with difficult emotions such as breathing exercises, music, physical activity, writing or art.
- **Keep supporting them:** As things get better and scars heal, you might begin to drift away. Try not to, this early recovery phase is sometimes the hardest part of all.
- **And don't forget to support yourself, too:** It's important that you look after yourself and the rest of the family as well as the child who is self-

harming. If we're not physically and emotionally well then we're not in a good position to support those we care about.

'Sometimes you have to do something just for you. Have a bath, go for a walk, have a meal out. You'll come back refreshed and better able to manage.'

Further support

- YoungMinds www.youngminds.org.uk Parents Helpline 0808 802 5544 (Monday to Friday 9.30am – 4pm)
- [Coping with self-harm: a guide for parents and carers](#) (University of Oxford in conjunction with YoungMinds and The Royal College of Psychiatrists)
- [Factsheet from The Royal College of Psychiatrists](#)
- The Parent's Guide to Self-Harm: What parents need to know by Jane Smith. Available as a [paperback](#) or Kindle.
- A Short Introduction to Understanding and Supporting Children and Young People Who Self-Harm by Professor Carol Fitzpatrick. Available as a [paperback](#) or Kindle.
- [Self-Harm Alternatives](#): over 130 ideas for use in recovery suggested by young people, collated by Dr Pooky Knightsmith