

Section 7: Fact sheet on self-harm for parent/carers

As a parent/carers, you may feel angry, shocked, guilty and upset. These reactions are normal, but what that young person you care about really needs is support from you. That young person needs you to stay calm and to listen to them cope with very difficult feelings that build up and cannot be expressed. They need to find a less harmful way of coping.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is any behaviour such as self-cutting, swallowing objects, taking an overdose, self-strangulation, running in front of a car or risk-taking behaviour, e.g. alcohol intoxication, where the intent is to deliberately cause harm to self.

How common is self-harm?

Over the past 40 years, there has been a large increase in the number of young people who harm themselves. A large community study found that among 15- to 16-year-olds, approximately 7 per cent had self-harmed in the previous year.

Is it just attention-seeking?

Some people who self-harm have a desire to kill themselves. However, there are many other factors that lead people to self-harm, including a desire to escape, to reduce tension, to express hostility, to make someone feel guilty or to increase caring from others. Even if the young person does not intend to commit suicide, self-harming behaviour may express a strong sense of despair and needs to be taken seriously. It is not just attention-seeking behaviour.

Why do young people harm themselves?

All sorts of upsetting events can trigger self-harm, such as arguments with family, the breakup of a relationship, failure in exams and bullying at school. Sometimes several stresses occur over a short period of time, and one more incident is the final straw. Young people who have emotional or behavioural problems or low self-esteem can be particularly at risk from self-harm. Suffering a bereavement or serious rejection can also increase the risk. Sometimes, young people try to escape their problems by taking drugs or alcohol. This only makes the situation worse. For some people, self-harm is a desperate attempt to show others that something is wrong in their lives.

What you can do to help

Keep an open mind.	Help them find different ways of coping.
Make the time to listen.	Go with them to get the right kind of help as quickly as possible. Some people you can contact for help, advice and support are your family doctor, school health nurse or health visitor.



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