



For Parents & Carers

PORTUS

Understanding
Self-harm

Self-harm and Suicide Prevention

Parent & Carer Support Information



Understanding Self-Harm and Suicide – Kingston, Richmond & Wandsworth

visit: www.richmond.gov.uk/portus

Introduction

Experiencing poor mental health is common. National surveys show that at any one time 1 in 5 adults experience anxiety, depression or both.

Growing up can be difficult and children and young people are telling us that they feel intense pressure due to exams, friendships, family issues, identity and many other things. Over time this can impact on their emotional and mental health.



It's likely that you are reading this because a child or young person you care for is experiencing difficulties with their mental health. With the right help and support children and young people can recover from mental health problems.

There is a lot of literature available on self-harm and young people's mental health issues, and this resource is a brief introductory guide to the subject, with signposting to some of the best places to go for more information and practical support.

Surveys and research show that children and young people's mental health has worsened over recent years.

In 2022
one in six

children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental health disorder, increasing from 1 in 9, in 2017. The increase was seen in both boys and girls.

Self-harm is more likely in children and young people who experience emotional and mental health problems.

one in four

children and young people with a mental health disorder have harmed themselves as a way of coping with their feelings of distress.

What is Self-harm?

Self-harm is a behaviour that is done to deliberately harm oneself. Although some people who self-harm may experience suicidal thoughts, self-harm is more commonly used as a way of managing difficult emotions. It does this by helping to regulate intense feelings.

Self-harm can include:

- Self-cutting
- Hitting, bruising, and scratching
- Intentionally taking too much or too little medication
- Burning
- Suffocating
- Going without food or binge-eating
- Putting yourself in risky or dangerous situations
- Getting into a fight you know you can't win
- Drinking alcohol to the point that you lose consciousness

Why do people Self-harm?

Self-harm can fulfil several different functions:

- to manage extreme emotional upset
- to reduce tension
- to provide a feeling of physical pain to distract from emotional pain
- to express emotions such as hurt, anger or frustration
- a form of escape
- an effort to regain control over feelings or problems
- an attempt to punish themselves
- to draw attention to their emotional pain so they will be taken seriously and get help
- to identify with a peer group

How Self-harm can become addictive.

Self-harm can help children and young people feel better in the short-term but doesn't help in the long-term. This is because they often have a need to repeat the behaviour when their distress builds again.

The best way to change their behaviour is to explore the reasons for the distress they feel and find better/less harmful ways for them to express their feelings.



The Addictive Model of Self-Harming (Non-suicidal and Suicidal) Behavior - PMC (nih.gov)

Discovering your child is self-harming

Some parents may notice the signs of self-harm in their children. Some children may tell their parents about their self-harm; other parents find out from friends, teachers, or medical staff.

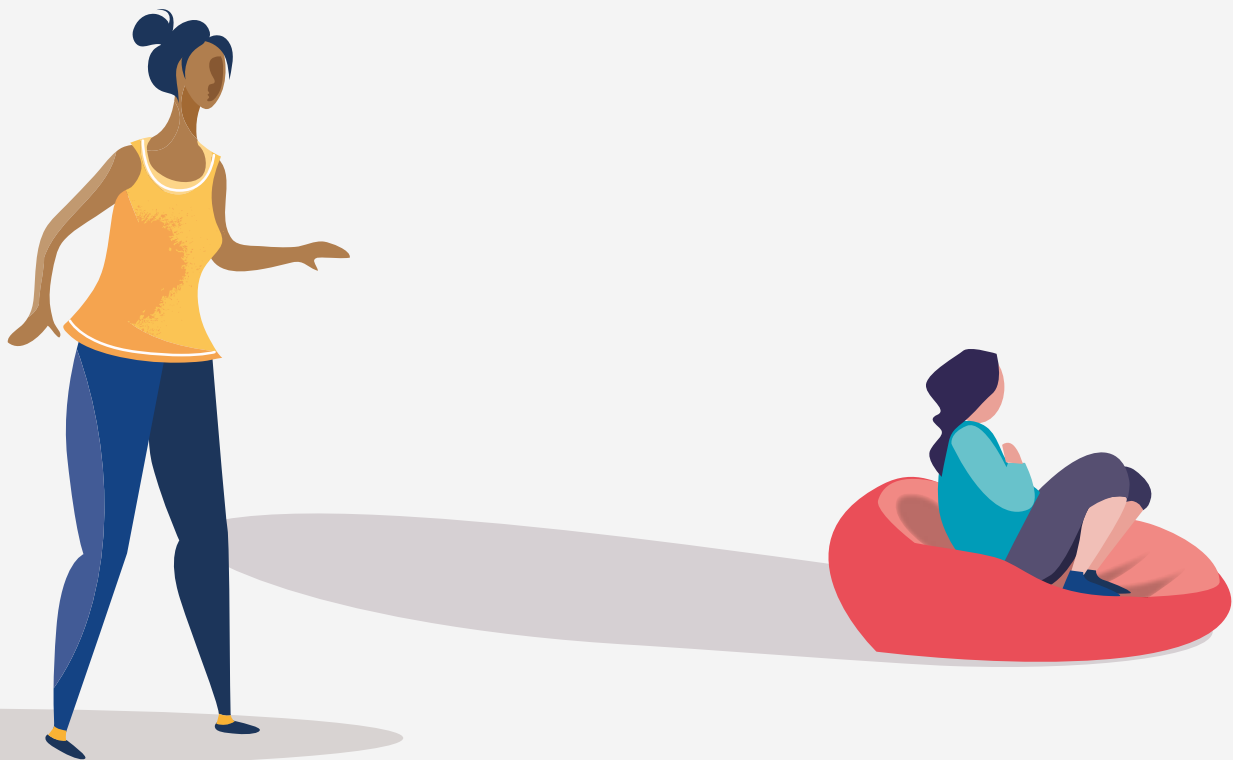
Discovering that your child is self-harming can be very upsetting and stressful. Parents may experience a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, helplessness, frustration, shame or disgust.

Dealing with your emotions

It is very normal to feel strong emotions. If you can, try to take some time to let your feelings settle. It's best to focus on your child's needs at this time, and it will support your child better if you are able to approach the situation calmly and with a willingness to listen and understand.

It might be helpful to get yourself some support and an outlet so you can manage your feelings and best support your child.

While self-harm can seem very dramatic and can be initially shocking, keep in mind that this is your child's way of best trying to manage overwhelming and difficult feelings that they can't handle any other way. In letting out emotions this way it can protect them from doing something more extreme.



Helping your child

If you suspect that your child is self-harming, this is what you can do to help:

START THE CONVERSATION

- Try to have a conversation during another activity, like a walk or drive. Don't bring up self-harm straight away. Ask how they're doing and if everything's okay. Have this talk when things are good between you if possible, not after an argument
- Let them know you are concerned about them right now. It helps to be open and honest and say a bit about why this is (they seem quieter than usual, more anxious, have a lot going on/exams, not eating etc.)
- At some point in the conversation you might need to say you've been wondering if they're self-harming, and why you think that. Be tentative, and ask if it's true. Give them a chance to take the lead.
- Say you want to help if you can and you're not going to tell them what they're doing is wrong etc – you just want to understand it because you care/ love them and that will not change.
- Show that you are prepared to listen to what they have to say. Having a caring, open tone of voice is very important – they will be very attuned to how you sound.

- Recognise how hard it might be for them to talk, and if they do not want to talk, see if they will write you a note, email or message about how they feel. You can use this **Feelings Resource**
- Ask if they would rather speak to someone else, and offer to help find someone. A list of contacts and helplines can be found in this resource.
- Whatever the outcome, say that you're always there if they want to talk to you at any time. Try not to take it personally if they won't talk – talking is difficult and they may be trying to protect you.

WORK TOGETHER

Self-harming isn't always something that you can resolve without additional help, but you may be able to support your child with some of the following:

- If your child can be open about their self-harm, encourage them to talk about the feelings and situations that may trigger it
- Explore what they might do differently. Ask if there's anything you can do/do differently that might help
- Try to think together of ways to handle strong feelings that do not involve self-harm.
- Help them think through their problems and identify workable solutions
- Tell them they only need to work with what's happening right now
- Sometimes delaying the urge to self-harm, with something immediate can be useful – so that might be them coming to you and you going for a walk together
- Let them know you're always available to talk when they need it, and that you can work this out together
- You could also introduce them to the **Combined Minds app** which contains lots of ideas and practical suggestions on how to cope with difficult emotions relating to self-harm.



Getting the right support for your child.

Once you have discovered that your child is harming themselves it is important to help them get support for their emotional distress. The kind of help they will need will depend on their level of need.

Involve your child if possible and ask them who they'd like you to talk to. If possible, get their permission to speak to their school and GP to understand the best option of support.

If they won't give permission, depending on their age and the severity of the situation, you could give them a bit more time, or you may need to say that you understand they're not happy about this but you do need to get them some help.

While it's good to involve their GP and school, there are other options including online support and private therapy. (See some support options below under Helpful Resources).

INVOLVING SCHOOL

Many schools have access to psychological support through the new Mental Health Support Teams programme.

There are specific resources available to schools to support them in making the best decisions about how to help your child.

If you want to speak to someone at your school start with your child's Head of Year, they will be able to put you in touch with the best person to help. We have included some links below to additional information on helping your child.



Consent for sharing information

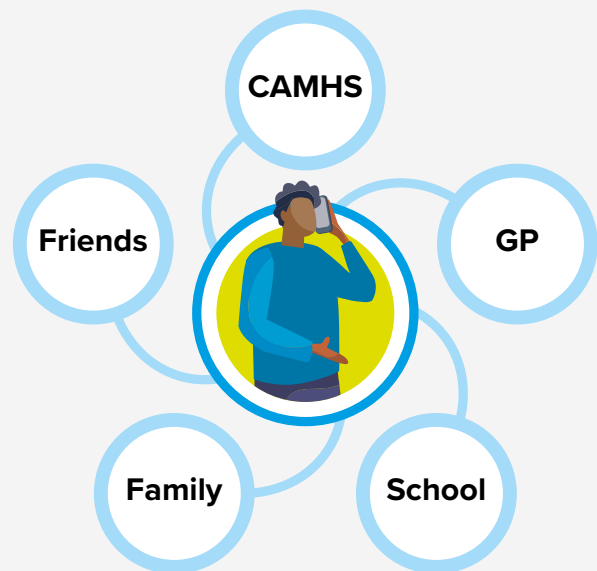
Your child can recover from their emotional distress with the right support. The best support will include working together with other people.

Some parents may not want anyone else to know that their child is struggling with their mental health, this is an understandable feeling because society is not as understanding about mental distress as it should be.

This guidance has been developed because we want people to get the help they need to feel better.

It's important to give your consent to your GP and school so they can share information with the right people when supporting your child.

Your school and GP will make sure you know what information they will share before they do this.



This toolkit contains a pathway specifically to help your children's school college and GP find the right support.

Self-harm and suicide risk

Whilst self-harm is common in young people, suicide is rare. Sometimes, self-harm is associated with suicidal behaviour or thoughts.

If you are concerned that your child may be experiencing thoughts of suicide, the best way to try to find out is to ask them directly.

We know that this can be difficult, and some parents would worry about talking to their child about suicide.

Research tells us that talking about suicide **does not** put the idea into their head.

In fact, talking with your child about suicide creates a safe space for them to be open and honest about how they feel. It can be a big relief to tell someone, and they will see you as a safe person to turn to. Feeling isolated and alone with problems can be a strong factor behind suicidal feelings.

Having the conversation about suicide

Talking to your child about suicidal thoughts is not easy. Having the conversation is the most important thing.

As a parent it can be frustrating and hard to understand what is happening to your child and why they are feeling this way. Some parents feel that their child is trying to punish them or deliberately hurt them.

The reasons why people experience thoughts of suicide are complex and differ from person to person. You may never fully understand them and that is OK.

Revealing thoughts of suicide is a difficult but incredibly brave thing for a child or young person to do.

The **Zero Suicide Alliance** has some helpful online training to help you have the conversation and there are other good sources of help in this resource.

Parents who have lost a child to suicide, didn't think it would happen to them.

Asking the question

The following steps can help you find out if your child is thinking about suicide.

- **Ask directly.** Use the word suicide. Practice asking first if this helps. It may give you more confidence.
- **Stay calm.** This is important as your child may be looking at how you react to decide how much they should tell you.
- **Be clear and direct.** Look them in the eye and ask, 'are you thinking about suicide?'
- If you are unsure of how to start the conversation, contact the **Papyrus helpline HOPELINEUK. 0800 068 4141**
- Papyrus' specially trained advisers can talk you through what to say and how to support your child during this conversation.
- Talking with a young person about suicide can be very difficult. If you need support following your conversation Papyrus advisers are on hand to debrief with you and help you to process what has been said and where to go next.

What if they say yes?

If your child says that they have had, or are currently experiencing, suicidal thoughts the most important thing to do is.

- Stay calm
- Acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to talk about these thoughts and feelings to you, and that you're so glad they told you
- Tell them you are there to listen and keep them safe
- Tell them they are your priority and that there is help and support available.



How can I help?

As a parent your first reaction may be to try and fix things and sort their problems out. This isn't always easy or possible so it's best to resist this urge. Stay calm and give them space to talk.

Experiencing thoughts of suicide can be extremely isolating for a young person. You may be unsure of how to respond and be worried about saying the wrong thing. But just being there and willing to listen helps your child feel less alone, which is really important.

LISTEN, HEAR AND UNDERSTAND

It can take time for a young person to feel safe enough to share their feelings. Try to drop everything you think you know and to hear how it really is for your child. Just listening, and withholding your opinions, helps them open up. Be interested and ask, rather than guess, how they feel.

Use their own words to show you've heard them. This isn't easy and needs practice – most people are bad at really listening. But listening and talking is really important. You can also let them know how brave they are and how well they're doing.

Be mindful that your child may not want lots of people to know about their self-harm/suicidal feelings, it can feel very shaming and embarrassing.

KNOW YOUR OWN FEELINGS

Your feelings are important too, but it's best to share these with someone else, like a friend, parent support line or therapist.

Many young people won't talk to their parents because they don't want to make them anxious – this is because they need their parents to act calmly. It may therefore be easier for them to talk to someone outside of the family. It isn't that the parents have done anything wrong. Try not to take anything too personally when trying to support your child.

At times, when your child is struggling, you might not recognise them or their behaviours. Remember that often when people are distressed, they lash out at the ones they love the most. This can be because it's safer to show their distress with those they're closest to. This can be hard but they still need your support.

COPING RIGHT NOW

You can explore with your child how or whether the following things might help them to cope right now:

- Just focusing on getting through this moment rather than thinking too far ahead into the future
- How they might stay away from drugs or alcohol and what to replace them with
- How to get to a safe place if they contact you when away from home
- How they might spend more time with other people
- The importance of doing things they enjoy – what that might include
- Working with them on a plan to keep them safe. We have included some safety plans in this resource or you can check out these links

Papyrus Safety Plan – Staying Safe Safety Plan

Contact the Papyrus helpline Hopeline UK to get support on your next steps.

Call: 0800 068 4141

Text: 07860 039 967

Email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

9am -midnight every day

Stay calm - Ask directly - Be clear and direct



VISIT PAPYRUS



Protecting your child from internet dangers

We live in a digital age and social media now has a big influence on children and young people, most of whom have access to the internet through phones or other devices.

While there is a lot of useful information online, we need to be aware that there is also much content that can affect children and young people's mental health, and may sometimes put them at risk.

It's not easy to monitor content and the following steps can help to protect your child:

- Inform yourself through internet safety information sites such as **Child net**
- Discuss internet safety and the influence of social media with your children. Child net provides ways to discuss this and negotiate boundaries with your child
- Explore the safeguards that your internet provider can provide to ensure content is appropriate
- The **R;pple tool** has been designed specifically to help with content relating to self-harm and suicide



Looking after yourself and other family members

Adults can struggle with day-to-day life too, and supporting a child going through difficulties can increase any anxiety and frustration you may feel.

It is normal for parents to experience strong emotions at this time and it's really important that you look after yourself as well as your child.

If you are supporting your child through difficulties, you might feel upset, frustrated, confused, or scared.

Your child's recovery from self-harm and suicidal thoughts may be a long process, so try to find time for taking care of yourself.

Pay attention to your own physical and emotional signs of stress, such as stomach aches, difficulty sleeping, or struggling to manage anger. **This link** provides more physical and mental symptoms of stress.

- Do things you enjoy such as, going out with friends, exercise, hobbies, etc.
- Learn to notice and accept your own feelings. It may help to write them down.
- Find an outlet for your emotions, eg talking to a friend, relative, therapist or a support line.
- You may find other emotions coming out as anger – be careful that your child does not think this is directed at them.
- Give yourself permission only to do things that really need doing and don't worry about less important tasks. Don't try to over-achieve
- Accept help from family and friends

Explore getting support from local talking therapies services like:

Richmond Well-being Service

Kingston - iCope

Talk Wandsworth

Helpful Resources for Families

The following resources can help you to feel more confident about supporting your child:

- **Coping with Self-harm, a guide** for parents and carers
- **Free online course** helps parents discuss self-harm with their children.
- **Free e-training by the Zero Suicide Alliance** (20 minutes)
- **Self-harm: Parents' experiences - Overview** (healthtalk.org)
- NSPCC self-harm **support for families**
- Young Minds Parents **support line and webchat**
- MindEd for Families **website**
- **Calm Harm** is a free app that helps you manage or resist the urge to self-harm
- **7 ways to support children and young people who are worried or anxious** (annafreud.org)
<https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/resources/7-ways-to-support-children-and-young-people-who-are-worried/>
- **How to Talk to Your Child about Mental Health** | YoungMinds
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/how-to-talk-to-your-child-about-mental-health/>
- **Families Under Pressure** - Maudsley Charity.
<https://maudsleycharity.org/familiesunderpressure/>



SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE, AND FAMILIES

South West London and St. Georges Mental Health NHS Trust

24/7 Mental Health Crisis Line
0800 028 8000.

Papyrus, prevention of young suicide.

HopelineUK
<https://www.papyrus-uk.org/papyrus-hopeline247/>
Call: **0800 068 4141**
Text: **07860039967**
Email: pat@papyrus-uk.org

Samaritans

Tel: **116 123 (24/7)**
www.samaritans.org

YoungMinds – Self harm factsheets for young people Parent Helpline and webchat. You can call us for free on **0808 802 5544** from 9:30am - 4pm, Monday - Friday.
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/>

Childline - If you're under 19 you can confidentially call, chat online or email about any problem big or small. Free 1-2-1 counselling available.
Call: **0800 1111**

Kooth. Online well-being community. Free 1-2-1 online counselling.
www.kooth.com

Shout

Text YM to **85258**.
Shout provides free, 24/7 text support for young people across the UK experiencing a mental health crisis.
All texts are answered by trained volunteers, with support from experienced clinical supervisors.
Texts are free from EE, O2, Vodafone, 3, Virgin Mobile, BT Mobile, GiffGaff, Tesco Mobile and Telecom Plus.
Texts can be anonymous, but if the volunteer believes you are at immediate risk of harm, they may share your details with people who can provide support.
Opening times: 24/7

The Mix

Offers support to anyone under 25 about anything that's troubling them.
Email support available via their online contact form.
Free 1-2-1 webchat service available.
Free short-term counselling service available.
Opening times:
3pm - 12am, seven days a week
Call: **0808 808 4994**
The Mix – Essential support for under 25s
<https://www.themix.org.uk/>

Calm Harm

A free app providing support and strategies to help you resist or manage the urge to self-harm.
Can be downloaded from Google Play or App Store.
Home - **Calm Harm App**
<https://calmharm.co.uk/>

Tellmi

A free app for teenagers (11+) providing resources and a fully moderated community where you can share your problems, get support and help other people too.
Can be downloaded from Google Play or App Store.
Tellmi App
<https://www.tellmi.help>

Combined Minds

Supporting young people's mental health
<https://combinedminds.co.uk/>

Be Headstrong

Real Life and Real Faith in the Real World | Head Strong
<https://www.beheadstrong.uk>

National Self-Harm Network

A supportive and dedicated forum.
<https://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads.html>

Alumina

Free online self-harm support for 11-19's.
<https://www.selfharm.co.uk/#help>

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A collaboration between The Royal Borough of Kingston,
Richmond & Wandsworth Borough Councils



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