

How to respond to a young person who is self harming

It is important to understand that self harming is different from a suicide attempt. People who self harm hurt themselves to cope, to gain relief or gain control, they usually do not want to die.

A common misconception is that people who self-harm do it for attention. Although a small minority of young people may hope to communicate their needs and influence others in this way, most people who self-harm do so in private and hide their scars. They often fear being considered as "freaks" and are usually ashamed of their behaviour.

People who self-harm need to get help. There are a number of different treatment approaches depending on what is causing the problem. Treatment can involve individual and family work. Young people are helped to learn to cope with the overwhelming and difficult feelings that lead to self-harm. They also learn effective problem solving skills as well as relaxation and stress management. If the young person has an underlying problem (that is dealing with trauma in their background; depression or anxiety) they can also be supported in addressing this.

When responding to a person who has self harmed remember:

- Don't panic or overreact.
- Make sure the person gets medical attention if needed.
- Try to respond neutrally. Acknowledge what the person has done in a matter of fact way. Being angry or punishing or overly caring or concerned is not helpful.
- The motivation to reduce or stop self-harming behaviour must come from the individual; ultimatums do not work!
- Make yourself available to listen. Encourage them to come and talk out their feelings instead of self-harming.
- Take their problems seriously.
- Find ways to enhance self-esteem and recognise their positive qualities.
- Develop effective communication, coping and social skills.