SELF-HARM

A Guide for Family & Loved Ones | Understanding and responding with care

Start here: Self-harm can be a way of coping with overwhelming distress; it does not automatically mean someone wants to die. However, self-harm can cause serious injury and may be associated with suicide risk. Take concerns seriously, listen without judgement, and seek appropriate support.

What helps in the first conversation

Choose a private, calm moment. You do not need perfect words. Try: “I care about you. I’m glad you told me. Would you like to tell me what has been happening?” Listen more than you speak. Ask what support feels helpful and avoid demanding explanations or promises to stop.

Helpful: “What tends to happen before things feel unbearable?” “Would you like company, space, or help contacting someone?” “Are you safe right now?”

Avoid: blame, threats, punishment, graphic questions, comparisons, or making their disclosure about your own shock. Keep your tone steady even if you feel frightened.

Understanding the bigger picture

Self-harm may relate to emotional pain, numbness, shame, trauma, isolation, sensory overwhelm or difficulty communicating distress. There is no single explanation. Ask about the person’s experience rather than assuming the reason. Their privacy matters, but safety concerns may require sharing information with appropriate professionals.

When safety comes first

If someone has a serious injury, has taken an overdose, is unconscious, or is in immediate danger, call **999** in the UK. For urgent mental health help that is not an immediate emergency, contact **NHS 111** and select the mental health option where available, or seek urgent clinical advice. Ask directly about suicidal thoughts if concerned; asking does not put the idea into someone’s head.

UK support: Samaritans 116 123 (24/7 emotional support); NHS 111 for urgent advice; 999 for immediate danger. If the person is under 18, involve appropriate safeguarding and clinical support.

Small, supportive next steps

Offer to sit with them, help arrange a GP appointment, accompany them if invited, or write down what they want a professional to know. Encourage treatment for underlying distress. Agree on a way to check in that respects their preferences. Support is not the same as surveillance or control.

WORKSHEET 1

Our Support & Safety Conversation

Complete together only if the person wishes. They may skip any question. This is a conversation aid, not a substitute for a clinician-led safety plan.

1. What situations, feelings or changes tell us that distress is building?

2. What might help in the early stages (quiet space, grounding, movement, contacting someone, reducing demands)?

3. What words or actions feel supportive? What should others avoid?

4. Who would you feel comfortable contacting when things become difficult?

5. What is our agreed plan if there is an injury, suicidal thinking or immediate danger?

Safety agreement: We will prioritise immediate medical help when needed, take suicidal thoughts seriously, and seek professional guidance. We will explain any necessary sharing of information wherever safely possible.

6. One small step we can take together this week:

WORKSHEET 2

Supporting Them While Caring for Yourself

Family members may feel fear, sadness, anger, helplessness or exhaustion. You can offer consistent care without carrying sole responsibility for another person's safety or recovery.

A compassionate family check-in

What worries am I carrying, and which parts are mine to act on?

When I feel frightened, how might that affect my words or tone? What helps me slow down?

What boundaries would help us both feel respected (privacy, check-ins, time, household expectations)?

Who can support me without sharing unnecessary private details?

What can I do after a difficult conversation to settle my own nervous system?

A practical plan for the coming week

One supportive action: _____

One boundary to communicate kindly: _____

One source of professional or personal support: _____

Remember

You do not have to fix everything in one conversation. Recovery is rarely linear. A calm, respectful relationship, appropriate professional care and attention to safety can make a meaningful difference.

Important: This educational guide is not a diagnosis, treatment plan or emergency service. If you are concerned about immediate safety, seek urgent medical help.