

# Self-harm

## A quick help guide for parents



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If you're reading this guide then it's likely that your child, or someone you care about, is self-harming - or you're worried that they could be. This booklet is just a quick guide, to help you better understand what is happening in the short term. We can help you find other, high-quality information to help you in the longer term, and there are some ideas at the back of the booklet.

We understand that it's really tough, finding out that someone you care about is hurting themselves - but it's really important to remember that **most self-harm is relatively safe**. We agree that all self-harm is to be taken seriously and explored to help your child find other strategies and work towards reducing or stopping their self-harm, but be reassured it is unlikely that they are in immediate danger and so a gentle and calm approach is most helpful. It's also really important to remember that, although it's natural to worry, you aren't responsible for your child's self-harm. If they didn't tell you, that's probably because they wanted to protect your feelings. Confiding in someone about self-harm is incredibly difficult, especially to those who are closest to us. But now that you are aware of how much your child is struggling, you are in a better position to help.

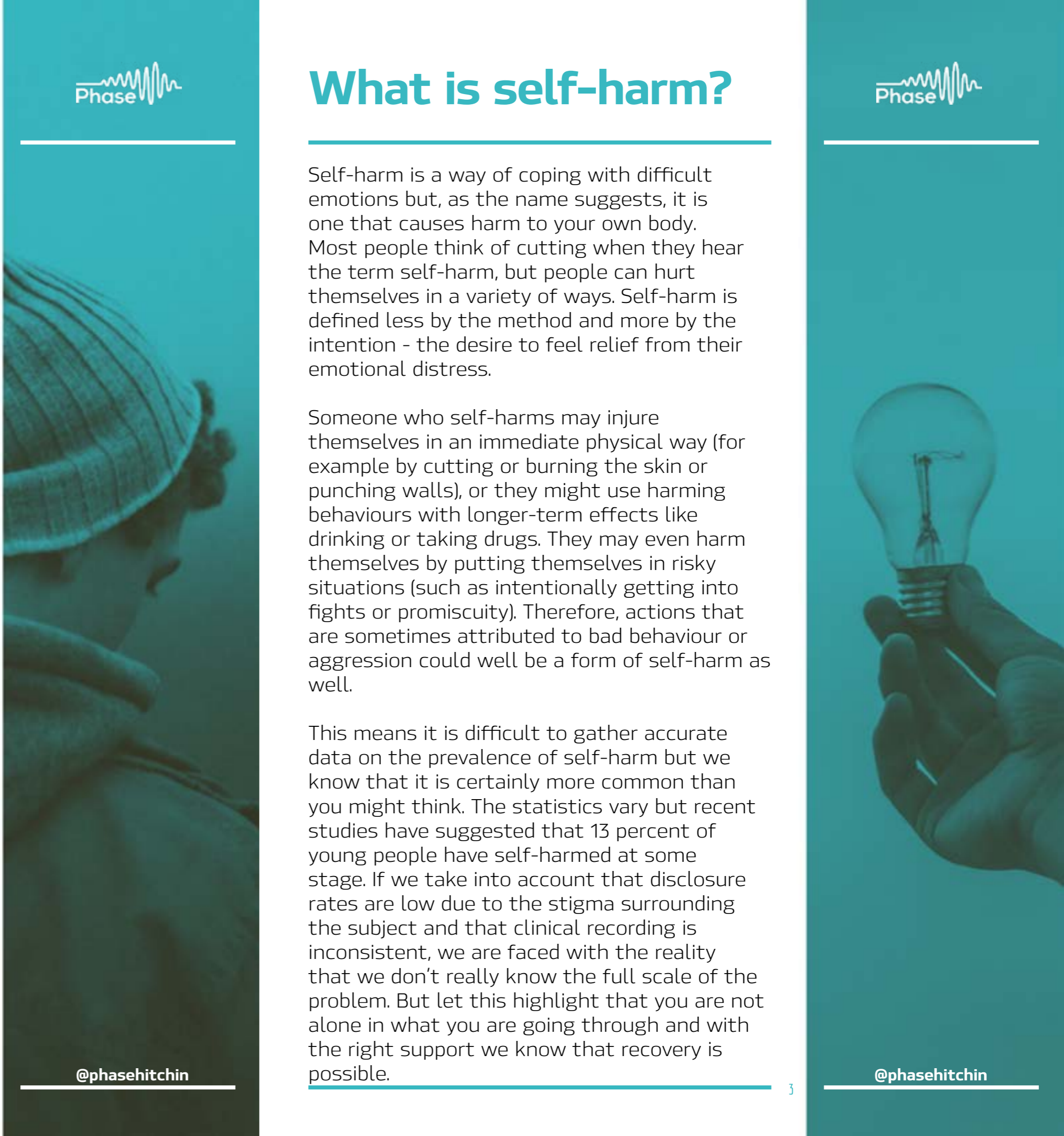


# What is self-harm?

Self-harm is a way of coping with difficult emotions but, as the name suggests, it is one that causes harm to your own body. Most people think of cutting when they hear the term self-harm, but people can hurt themselves in a variety of ways. Self-harm is defined less by the method and more by the intention - the desire to feel relief from their emotional distress.

Someone who self-harms may injure themselves in an immediate physical way (for example by cutting or burning the skin or punching walls), or they might use harming behaviours with longer-term effects like drinking or taking drugs. They may even harm themselves by putting themselves in risky situations (such as intentionally getting into fights or promiscuity). Therefore, actions that are sometimes attributed to bad behaviour or aggression could well be a form of self-harm as well.

This means it is difficult to gather accurate data on the prevalence of self-harm but we know that it is certainly more common than you might think. The statistics vary but recent studies have suggested that 13 percent of young people have self-harmed at some stage. If we take into account that disclosure rates are low due to the stigma surrounding the subject and that clinical recording is inconsistent, we are faced with the reality that we don't really know the full scale of the problem. But let this highlight that you are not alone in what you are going through and with the right support we know that recovery is possible.



# Why do people self-harm?

Can you think of a time when you have narrowly avoided a really nasty situation – like braking just in time to avoid a car accident?

## **Can you remember the rush of relief you felt?**

Many (not all) people who self-harm feel a very similar rush of relief. In fact, at the time they may not even feel pain in the case of self-injury – but they will feel it later.

The triggers for self-harm are different for everyone. It might be because of a difficult situation that they are experiencing or ongoing emotional struggles such as low self-esteem. It might be because of pressure, like exam stress. It could even be because someone made the wrong comment at the wrong time, it doesn't have to be anything really major. For some people, they can't express what they are feeling in words but harming gives them another focus – it's often easier to deal with a physical injury than emotional pain.

**People who self-harm do so because, in the moment, it makes them feel better**, or at least something other than the underlying emotional pain. The problem is that the feeling doesn't last, and the chemical release it causes can sometimes be addictive so that they may come to rely on it and need to harm more to feel it. The good thing is that by getting the right support and learning new ways to cope, in time, the cycle can be broken.



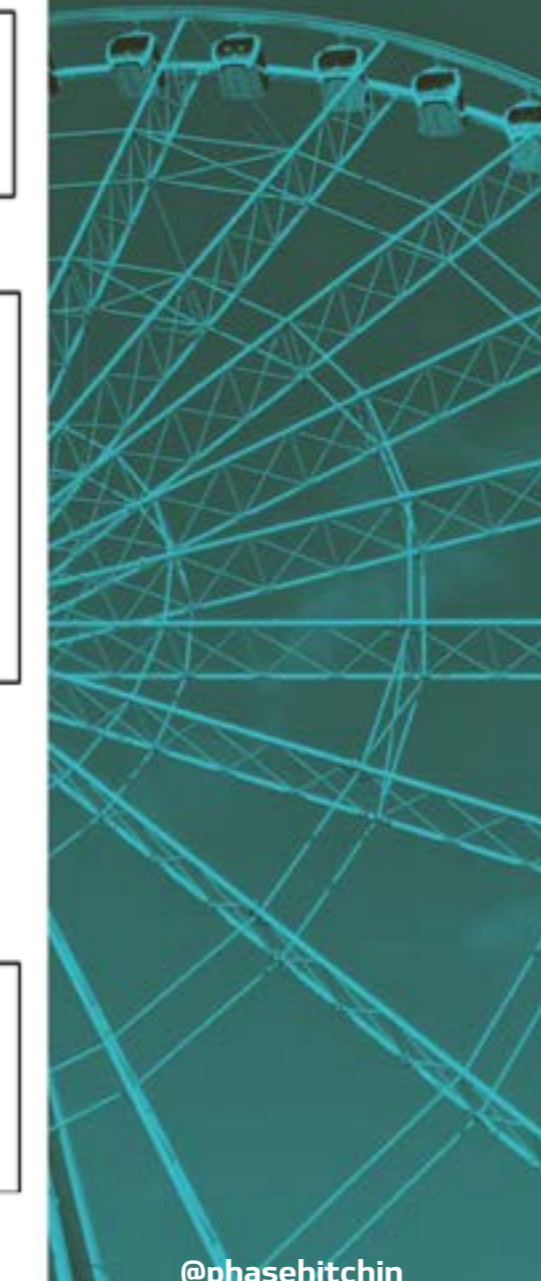
# Why do people self-harm?

Some people think that self-harm is an indicator that someone is feeling suicidal. This is possible – but not very likely. The misconception comes from the fact that people who feel suicidal are very likely to self-harm, but the reverse isn't necessarily true. If you are concerned that your child might be having suicidal thoughts, then try to talk to them openly about this rather than making assumptions either way. You and your child should speak to your GP if these concerns are valid.



# What do I do when my child has self-harmed?

We understand that it can be really difficult to know what to do if you find that your child has hurt themselves. This table may help you to decide what to do next.



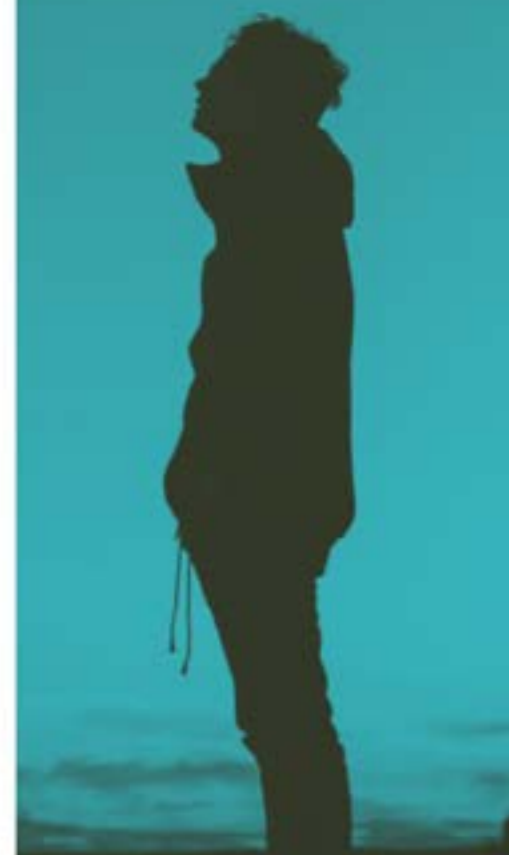
# Some general advice for responding to self-harm



**Try to stay as calm as possible. It's unlikely that your child is in imminent danger.** Your child might be frightened by how they feel or by their injury, and they might even be frightened that you'll be angry or upset with them for it. If they know they can come to you for support, it'll help their recovery in the long run.

**Don't ask your child not to harm, or take away the tools they use to do it.** It's natural to want to protect your child and to try to stop them experiencing the pain they're causing themselves, and it can be really hard to understand why they would want to do something harmful to themselves. However it may be that they feel like they can't cope any other way at the moment and so they may feel in a more vulnerable position without their coping strategy and the fear or guilt of letting people down through relapsing is an extra emotional burden and potential trigger for self-harm. There is also a risk that, if they can't stop, they may try to hide it so that they are not upsetting anyone. Sometimes this means that they'll seek other methods or find other tools which might not be so safe. **They will likely stop in the long run when they are ready, but might not be able to do so immediately.** Each situation is unique and some more dangerous than others requiring more careful judgement, but in most cases we feel that it is counterproductive to ask someone directly to stop harming.

**Try not to worry if they don't want to confide in you.** They might not want to worry you or upset you, they might feel that they need to talk to someone who is not so close to them, or they might be struggling for the words to talk about



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it at all. Try to focus on making sure that they are talking to *someone*.

Remember that any professional they talk to (teacher, youth worker, school nurse etc.) will keep what your child says confidential, unless they feel that they are in danger - so you can rest assured that they will not keep secrets at the expense of your child's wellbeing.

**Remember that they are still the same person inside.** They might be struggling, but their identity hasn't changed. This is why lots of people avoid terms like 'self-harmer' - labels can be really unhelpful, and can make someone feel like everyone else sees them differently now that their self-harm has been discovered. **They still have all the same talents, qualities and passions - and they haven't stopped needing you.**

**Consider keeping a first aid kit where your child can access it, and teaching them to use it.** If you don't feel confident teaching them to look after their wounds, then try to find someone else like a school nurse or someone who specialises in working with those who self-harm, who might be able to. **That way, you know that they are taking care of themselves.** It might be that this also encourages them to come and tell you if they want to talk or they have a wound that worries them.

Professionals such as school nurses can also talk to your child about how to stay safe if they don't feel ready to stop harming yet - this might include things like making sure that blades or other tools are clean, and explaining that



# Some general advice for responding to self-harm

harming by taking tablets or swallowing non-ingestible things is never safe.

**Help your child to find ways to care for themselves, or other ways to cope.** Is he/she really into art, or sport, or reading? Doing things they enjoy like that can be really good ways of learning to cope better. Think about what you might do if you'd had a bad day at work? Would you watch a funny film, have a hot bath or meet a friend for a coffee? Would any of these help your child? You also might be able to help them make a 'toolkit' to keep nearby for when they feel stressed or upset - maybe with relaxing things like essential oils or hand cream to massage into skin, distractions like puzzles or films, a journal to express feelings through writing or drawing, comforting things like hot chocolate, tactile things like bubble wrap or plasticine or rosary beads, and prompts that can help ground them such as quotes and reminders of breathing techniques.

Helping them learn self-care routines can help, too - **the more they value themselves, the less they may need to harm** and this is something you can model yourself.

**Consider having a code word** - it can be something silly, like 'banana'. It might be that your child wants to tell you if they're not feeling OK but doesn't have the words. **Being able to use a code word might help them share with you that they are struggling, without having to find the right words.**



# Useful websites

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[Harmless.org.uk](https://harmless.org.uk)

[Nspcc.org.uk](https://nspcc.org.uk)

[Rethink.org](https://rethink.org)

[Selfharm.co.uk](https://selfharm.co.uk)

[Youngminds.org.uk](https://youngminds.org.uk)

Be careful with advice on social media or unmoderated websites. It might be really helpful – but bad advice could make things worse.

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Hopefully this guide has helped you understand self-harm a bit better. Please try to find some support for yourself, too, whether it be from one of the above organisations or elsewhere. You are going to have questions, and potentially strong emotions to work through, but you may not be able to talk it through with your child yet so it's important to find somewhere else that you can talk. And don't forget to take really good care of yourself so that you're in the best position to cope with what's happening. That might mean making sure you're eating and sleeping really well, and finding ways to relax. And try to get some quality time with your child – it's likely they really want and need you around.

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