



kids help line 1800 55 1800
lifeline 131 114

Deliberate self harm

Fact Sheet

What is deliberate self harm?

Deliberate self harm is when you deliberately inflict physical harm on yourself, usually in secret and often without anyone else knowing. Some examples are cutting, burning, biting or hitting your body, pulling out hair or scratching and picking at sores on your skin.

Deliberate self harm is not necessarily a suicide attempt and engaging in self harm may not mean that someone wants to die. Most commonly deliberate self harm is a behaviour that is used to cope with difficult or painful feelings.

Why do people deliberately harm themselves?

People who deliberately harm themselves have often had tough experiences or relationships in their lives. You may have:

- Been bullied or discriminated against
- Lost someone close to you, such as a parent, brother, sister or friend
- Broken up with a boyfriend or girlfriend
- Been physically or sexually abused
- Experienced a serious illness or disability that affects the way you feel about yourself
- Experienced problems with family, school or peer groups

Deliberate self harm may be used as a way to cope with experiences and the strong feelings associated with it. Self harm may:

- **Provide a way to express difficult or hidden feelings.** It is not uncommon to feel numb or empty as a result of overwhelming feelings you may be experiencing and engaging in deliberate self harm may provide you with a temporary sense of feeling again. It may also provide a way to express anger, sadness, grief or hurt.
- **Be a way of communicating to people that you need some support** when you feel unable to use words or any other way to do so.
- **Be a way of proving to yourself that you are not invisible**
- **Provide you with a feeling of control:** you might feel that self harm is one way you can have a sense of control over your life, feelings or body, especially if you feel as if other things in your life are out of control.

Deliberate self harm can bring an immediate sense of relief but it is only a temporary solution. It can also cause permanent damage to your body if you damage nerves. Psychologically, it may be associated with a sense of guilt, depression, low self-esteem or self-hatred and tendency to isolate yourself from others.

Finding help

Although it may seem hard, it's important that you reach out to someone who can help you work through some of the reasons for harming yourself and find healthier, more positive alternative strategies for alleviating the pain you feel inside. It may take time, but it's important to remember that you can move to a happier, better place.

Speaking to someone about your self harm may be hard and it is particularly important to trust the person you are speaking with.

If you are having difficulty speaking about what you're going through, you might start with sentences such as 'right now, I'm feeling...', 'I think it started when...', 'I've been feeling this for...', 'My sleep has been...', 'Lately school/work/uni has been...'



It may be necessary to talk to someone like a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist to help you to work through some of the reasons why you are harming yourself and to find alternative strategies for alleviating the pain you feel inside.

Like any relationship, building up trust with your counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist may take time and it is important you find someone you feel comfortable with. This may mean seeing several people before finding one that you "click" with.

If there is a family member you feel comfortable telling, it may be helpful for you to have their support in finding a counsellor that is right for you.

It's likely that the person you feel comfortable telling will already be worried about you and will be relieved at having the opportunity to listen and help.

If you don't get a positive response, try to remember that it is not because you have done something wrong, but because the person you have told may not know how to respond to what you have told them or may not understand much about deliberate self harm.

Don't give up - either try again or maybe speak to someone else who you think you might receive a more supportive response from.

If talking about it with someone is too overwhelming, an alternative is to email or write down what you want to say. Otherwise, a first step might be to talk to Lifeline (131 114) or Kidshelpline (1800 55 1800)- both of which are free anonymous 24 hour telephone counselling that won't appear on your phone bill.

If you or a friend are harming yourselves it is also important that you take care of the injuries caused and if necessary, seek medical help through your GP or, if it's serious, a hospital's emergency department.

In most situations, doctors and other health professionals must keep information given to them by patients or clients confidential. However, they are required to report information they receive if they have serious concerns about your (or someone else's) safety. See the confidentiality fact sheet listed on the right hand side for more info.

Coping without harming yourself

As well as support from a friend, family member and/or health professional, it may also be necessary to create a list of alternative strategies to self harm for managing your emotions.

If you are feeling like you want to harm yourself there are a number of things that you might try to distract yourself until the feelings become more manageable. If you can, make sure that you are around people and remove any sharp objects.

Some ideas for releasing energy or feelings include:

- **Scream it Dream it** - An interactive program on the Reach Out! site where you can release some of the emotions by writing things down and shooting them away in a rocket.
- Choose to put off harming yourself until you've spoken to someone or for 15 minutes (and see if you can extend it for another 15 minutes on so on, until the feeling passes)
- Write in a journal - you might like to use an online journal, such as the one on Reach Out! that is password protected
- Exercise - Go for a run or walk in the park to use up excess energy.
- Play video games - This may be a good way to distract you and help until the anxiety passes.
- Yell or sing at the top of your voice on your own or to music. You might do this into a pillow if you don't want other people in the house to hear.
- Draw or write in red texta over your body (instead of cutting)
- Relaxation techniques - Activities like yoga or meditation are often helpful in reducing anxiety
- Cry - crying is a healthy and normal way (ie not weak or dumb) to express your sadness or frustrations.
- Talk to someone - talk with a trusted friends or call a helpline like Lifeline (13 11 14) or Kids help line (1800 55 1800). Both are free and anonymous and the call does not show up on your phone bill.

Alternatives to deliberate self-harm

If none of the above suggestions help and you still feel the need to self harm, there may be a number of things

that you can do which won't cause injury like:

- Punching a pillow or punching bag
- Squeeze ice cubes till your fingers go numb
- Eat a chilli, or something really hot
- Have a cold shower
- Put vapour rub or deep heat under your nose (it stings and makes you cry)
- waxing your legs (or getting them waxed)

Take care of yourself

It's important to eat well, exercise and be kind to yourself. While not a solution in itself, doing all these things contribute to a higher self worth, increased stability of moods, and a general better sense of wellbeing - making you feel more happy, on the outside and the inside.

More information

Other things on Reach Out! to check out are [Reach Out! Central \(ROC\)](#), a new interactive space, and the [community forum](#), where you can talk about stuff and find support on dealing with a range of issues.