

Self harm: frequently asked questions

Parents and carers often have a lot of questions about self harm. This Q&A covers some of the most frequently asked questions. If you would like more information contact us on:

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Question 1 | How can I help?

Answer | Try not to focus on the self-harm. Ask them how they were feeling before they self-harmed to try and work out what the problem is.

Question 2 | How can I get my child to open up to me?

Answer | Parents can get very frustrated if their child will not speak to them about why they are self-harming. This can be particularly difficult if you had a good relationship with your child in the past. Here are some tips for speaking to your child in this situation:

- As relationships between parents and teenagers are often fraught, it is a good idea to concentrate on improving your relationship with them and building trust. It is important not to focus on self-harm. Instead, ask them about how things are going generally in their life and focus on how they are feeling.
- Try and encourage your child not to spend too much time on their own in their bedroom and encourage them to become more involved in family life.
- Try and increase the amount of time that you spend alone with your child. It may help to spend time with them outside the home. For instance, go for a walk, or a drive, or shopping or out to a café.
- Leaving leaflets about self harm and/or sources of support in their room might encourage them to speak to you.
- If your child does start opening about their concerns it is important not to interrupt them and jump to conclusions. You must really listen to them and hear them out.
- They still may not want to speak to you at all. In this case leave them with the message that you are willing to speak to them in the future, if they change their mind.
- You could suggest to your child that they write you an email/letter if they are finding it difficult to talk face to face. You could also suggest that they speak to another trusted family member or adult, if they would find this easier.

Question 3 | Should I remove the things they use to self harm?

Answer | It is best not to remove anything that your son or daughter uses to harm themselves or look after themselves following a self-harm incident. Removing such items is likely to make them feel that they have done something wrong or 'bad' and leave them feeling very distressed. Also, removing a coping mechanism

that currently works for them may result in them adopting a new, and potentially more dangerous, coping mechanism.

Question 4 | Should I check on them regularly if they are alone in their room/bathroom?

It can be difficult not to constantly check on your child, however, it is important to give them their own space. Try to find a balance between monitoring what they're doing and respecting their privacy.

Question 5 | Should I discipline them if they misbehave? Or will this lead to an act or risk of self-harm?

The underlying reasons why a person self-harms are unlikely to be related to 'normal' parental discipline. Disciplining your child following bad behaviour would not cause them to self-harm. However, it is important not to discipline your child in response to their self-harm behaviour. This could lead them to feel guilty, ashamed, confused, frustrated etc., and result in them struggling to find a new way to cope with their feelings.

Question 6 | I am worried about the risk to my child of going online. Should I take their laptop/tablet away from them?

It is understandable to be concerned about your child's internet usage. There are websites/blogs that 'glamorise' self-harm and there are online chatrooms that some people would view as unsafe. On the other hand, the internet can be a useful tool for people to learn about things on their own and even seek advice.

Taking away someone's laptop is not recommended as most people can easily access the internet in another way: on their phone, at the library, on their friend's computer etc. Instead you should discuss internet safety with your child. Installing antivirus software and setting some 'parental controls' on the computer/laptop will make internet usage safer. Additionally, you may wish to restrict the amount of time that your child can spend online, while encouraging them to engage in other activities. Depending on the age of your child, you may feel that it would be more suitable to have the computer in a communal room in the house, rather than in each child's individual bedroom.

Question 7 | Will they eventually stop self-harming?

In most cases self-harm is a temporary problem. Most people will, over time, adopt new coping mechanisms or find themselves in new life circumstances where they no longer feel the need to self-harm.

Question 8 | Is self-harm related to suicide?

Although some people who self-harm may have thoughts about suicide, this is not always the case. In fact, self-harm is a coping mechanism which may help prevent a person from contemplating suicide. A key distinction is that self-harm is often about experiencing and expressing feelings, whereas a suicide attempt would most likely indicate a desire to no longer experience feelings.