

# Staying safe – a guide for parents

**This leaflet gives advice about what to do if your child is having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of wanting to self-harm. If you have any questions or concerns about this information, please speak to a doctor, nurse or psychologist caring for your child.**

This information does not replace professional advice. If you have any concerns that a child is having thoughts about wanting to harm themselves or end their own life, speak to a GP to get support and advice. In an emergency, call 999 or go to your nearest emergency department (A&E).

In the event of a mental health crisis or emergency, urgent helplines are also available for people of any age. Please visit [www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/) to find contact details for your local service.

Living with a physical health condition, or having to visit the hospital, can be really stressful and overwhelming. It can bring up all sorts of feelings including worry, sadness or anger. It is really important that young people look after themselves and their psychological wellbeing.

Some people tell us that they are finding things really difficult and they have thoughts about wanting to hurt themselves or end their life. This leaflet has some ideas of what you can do if a young person you care for is feeling this way.

## What is self-harm?

'Self-harm' is when someone hurts themselves on purpose. Sometimes it is called 'self-injurious' behaviour. There are many reasons why someone might self-harm. For example some people say that self-harming is a way to get rid of, cope with, or distract from difficult thoughts or feelings. For others it might be a way to stop feeling 'numb', or a way to feel more in control.

It can be really difficult to stop self-harming, and it is important that anyone who is self-harming gets professional support. Although the young person might worry it will be difficult to talk to someone about it, there are lots of professionals who are specially trained to help people who are having these types of thoughts and feelings.

## Suicidal thoughts

Some young people tell us they have had thoughts of wanting to end their life, or that they have thoughts about 'not wanting to be here any more'. These are called suicidal thoughts.

Often people feel this way because they don't believe they will ever feel better, or they think that ending their life is the only option that they have. While many people have suicidal thoughts in their lifetime, most people do not actually want to act on them. Having these thoughts doesn't mean that they are going to (or have to) act on them.

Although this information explains about self-harming and suicidal thoughts, not all people who self-harm, or have thoughts of self-harming will have suicidal thoughts. Also, not all people who have suicidal thoughts will self-harm.

## Signs to look out for

Your child might speak to you about the difficult thoughts they are having, but for many young people it is difficult to open up. This might be because it is very upsetting to talk about them, or because they might be worried about upsetting parents or getting into trouble. As a parent, you might notice certain changes in behaviour that might be signs that your child is feeling very distressed or that they might be self-harming. For example, you might notice that your child:

- is not taking their medicine
- is feeling more negatively about themselves, or demonstrating that they are feeling hopeless or like they are a failure
- is falling behind at school
- has unexplained injuries on their body
- is avoiding exposing their skin (for example, wearing a jumper even when it is really hot)
- has a change in their sleeping or eating habits (for example, doing these things more or less often)
- is engaging in risky behaviours, such as drug or alcohol use
- is more withdrawn or is not wanting to socialise as much with friends or family
- is feeling less motivated (particularly to do activities they would usually enjoy)
- is feeling low in mood

People can have self-harming and suicidal thoughts because the stress and worry from difficult experiences builds up and become overwhelming. It is really normal to feel overwhelmed or distressed when there are lots of things going on. It is important that young people find techniques that help them to release or cope with these feelings.

The children's version of this information includes coping techniques for coping with difficult thoughts and feelings. You might like to read this information by yourself or with your child. We encourage young people to:

- follow a safety plan
- release the difficult feelings
- wait 5 minutes and review how they are feeling
- find ways to redirect their attention
- give their day some structure
- take some deep breaths
- try 'grounding' themselves

## Ways to help your child

Many parents tell us that it can be really difficult to speak to their child about self-harm or suicidal thoughts. They often feel worried about upsetting the young person or 'making things worse' by saying the wrong thing. There is no 'right' way to have this kind of conversation, but the following tips might help you, however you approach it.

### **Tips for setting up a conversation with your child**

- Make it clear that whenever they are ready you're available to listen and talk to them about how they are feeling, what's been going on for them, or why they feel the need to self-harm.
- Make sure to find a time when you are not likely to be distracted, and neither of you are busy with other things. Remember to actively listen and try to understand how your child is feeling, and why they self-harm.
- For some young people, speaking about something so personal can be really difficult, particularly if it requires lots of eye contact. Some families find that it's easier to have these conversations on WhatsApp or text, or while in the car, driving together, instead of sitting opposite each other at a table.

### **Tips for when you are speaking to your child**

- Offer them your support and ask how you can help. Try to avoid feeling the need to 'fix' things immediately. Active listening is a good first step to really understand what is happening.
- Try to stay calm and avoid being critical or saying anything that might increase any feelings of guilt and shame.
- Help build their self-esteem and confidence by reminding them of all the things you have noticed they do well, or the things that make you proud of them. It can be helpful to focus on things about them as a person, rather than their achievements.
- Discuss with them how they could access help from professionals (some details are listed at the end of their version of this leaflet and in this one).
- Think about who else in, or outside of, the family could support them. If possible, having a network of supportive others that the person can speak to can be really helpful.
- Let them know that you will be keeping an eye on them, and thinking and looking for ways to help them stay safe.

### **Other tips to support your child**

- You could try setting up a shared sign that your child can use to let you know that they are finding things more difficult. This could be having a special light that they turn on, or putting a specific soft toy on a specific shelf.
- If it is possible, remove any objects that they could use (or are using) to harm themselves. This might include sharp items (such as kitchen knives) or medicines.
- Talk to them about finding other methods of coping. This will be different for each person, but for some people it can be helpful to put their hand in cold water, punch a pillow, or even draw in red ink on the area where they would usually self-harm.
- A 'safety plan' is an important step to making sure your child is safe. There is an example at the end of this information for you to complete with your child.

Urgent helplines are available to support people of any age to respond to a mental health crisis or emergency. The NHS has contact details for your local service, [web www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/](http://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/where-to-get-urgent-help-for-mental-health/)

## **Taking care of yourself**

Discovering that your child self-harms can be overwhelming and distressing. Many parents worry that they are to blame, and wonder what they could have done differently to have stopped the young person feeling that way. Try to remember that it is not your fault and that you can seek professional help to cope with difficult news if you would like to. For more information on parental wellbeing, go to the NHS [website www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/childrens-mental-health/#your-mental-health](http://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/childrens-mental-health/#your-mental-health)

## Safety plan (to be completed with your child)

If I begin to have thoughts or intentions of hurting or killing myself, or if I am at risk of being in an unsafe situation, I agree to take the following steps.

I will talk about my feelings with someone that I trust. Specifically, I will try to talk to the following friends or family members:

.....  
.....

I, or someone else, will call these professionals for support:

..... at .....

..... at .....

If I cannot find someone to talk with, I can also:

- call the **Samaritans**, **phone** 116 123, or **ChildLine**, **phone** 0800 1111,
- text **The Mix** by texting 'THEMIX' to 85258.

**If I cannot stay safe, I will go immediately to my GP or my nearest emergency department (A&E) or call 999.**

My nearest emergency department is:

.....

I agree that to keep me safe, my parent/guardian can make sure that all medicines and sharp objects (such as kitchen knives) are monitored and restricted, or are securely locked away.

Signed

Young person ..... Date .....

Parent/Guardian ..... Date .....

## Support and more information

There are a number of organisation that can provide support if you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming themselves:

### YoungMinds

**web** [www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/for-parents/parents-helpline/)

**web** <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/get-urgent-help/>

### ChildLine

For support, **web** <https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline/>

For coping techniques, **web** [www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/](http://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/)

### The Mix

**web** [www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team](http://www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team)

### Samaritans

**web** [www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time/](http://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time/)

## Contact

If you are concerned that you, or someone you know, is having thoughts about wanting to harm themselves or end their own life, speak to a GP to get support and advice. In an emergency, call 999 or go to your nearest emergency department (A&E).

This resource was created by the psychology team at Evelina London Children's Hospital.

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **web** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)

### Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline, **phone** 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm

**email** [letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch, **phone** 020 7188 8815 **email** [languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day, **phone** 111

**web** [www.111.nhs.uk](http://www.111.nhs.uk)



Leaflet number: 5310/VER1

Date published: August 2022

Review date: August 2025

© 2022 Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

A list of sources is available on request