

Staying safe – a guide for children and young people

This leaflet gives information about what to do if you are 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 you.

This information does not replace professional advice. If you have any concerns that you or someone else is at risk of intentionally harming themselves, or attempting to end their own life, please speak to the GP to get support and advice or 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/ 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 you remember to look after yourself and speak to someone you trust if you are finding things difficult.

Some people tell us that they are finding things really difficult and they are having thoughts about wanting to hurt themselves or end their life. This leaflet has some ideas of what to do if you are feeling this way, and some suggestions for who you can talk to for support.

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 seeks professional support from someone that they trust. Although it might feel 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 had thoughts of '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 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 the person is going to (or has to) act on them.

Having suicidal thoughts can be very distressing. It is really important that you seek support by talking to someone you trust. This might be a parent, teacher or a healthcare professional, who can help you find safe ways to cope and respond to the thoughts.

Although this leaflet 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.

Understanding more about self-harm and suicidal thoughts

We all cope with stress and worry differently. Having difficult experiences can make someone more likely to try to hurt themselves or have thoughts about ending their life.

Some examples of difficult experiences are:

- being bullied at school or at home
- feeling under pressure at school or at home
- receiving difficult news, for example related to medical needs
- seeing or hearing about someone else self-harming or ending their life
- having difficulties in relationships with friends or family members
- having big changes at home or at school
- seeing or experiencing something traumatic

People can have self-harming and suicidal thoughts because the stress and worry from difficult experiences builds up and becomes overwhelming. It is really normal to feel overwhelmed or distressed when there are lots of things going on in your life. It is important to find techniques that help you release or cope with these feelings. This might include asking for support from healthcare professionals, teachers, or family members.

Coping with difficult thoughts and feelings

There are lots of ways that people cope with, or reduce, difficult and distressing thoughts. The ideas below might be helpful if you think you might be at risk of harming yourself, or if you are feeling very distressed. You might need to try a few different ideas to find the ones that work best for you.

Follow a safety plan

If you are worried that you cannot keep yourself safe, you can complete a safety plan that will remind you of things you can do to help you cope and stay safe.

When people feel very distressed it can be hard to think logically, and often thoughts are quite jumbled. If you are feeling this way, having a safety plan (that you made yourself when you were feeling a bit better) can be really helpful.

A safety plan usually lists things that help you to feel better when you are feeling distressed, and has contact details for organisations and people who usually help you to feel better. Try to share this plan with an adult who you trust and who can support you to stay safe.

We have included an example safety plan at the end of this leaflet for you to complete. You could take a photo of the completed plan and save it on your phone. This will make it easy to find to remind yourself of the techniques if you need them.

You can also create an electronic safety plan by visiting the Staying Safe [website](http://www.stayingsafe.net/ST/), www.stayingsafe.net/ST/

Release the difficult feelings

Self-harming can be a way of distracting from, or getting rid of, difficult thoughts and feelings that have built up. One way to cope is to find different (and safer) ways to release these. For example, you could try:

- talking to someone you know and trust, about how you are feeling
- writing down, or drawing, the thoughts or feelings that you have. Some people find it helpful to tear up the paper, scribble over the words or scrunch it up into a ball and throw it away after they have written it all down. Sometimes getting thoughts out of your mind and down on paper can help to reduce big and overwhelming feelings.
- squeezing a stress ball, or hitting something soft like a pillow
- putting your hand in cold water to imitate the feeling of pain
- doing something active, like punching the air, doing some star jumps, or going for a run or brisk walk

Wait 5 minutes

If you have the urge to act on distressing thoughts that you're having, try to wait 5 minutes before taking any action. Fill this time with distracting, or enjoyable, activities (see below). After 5 minutes, you can check in with yourself and see if the urge has gone. If it hasn't, try repeating this process for another 5 minutes. Continue to do this until the urge has disappeared.

Find ways to redirect your attention (distracting activities)

Try to find activities that you enjoy and that require some focus (such as completing a puzzle, watching a favourite TV show, speaking to a friend or family member, or colouring in). You could also try giving your pet, if you have one, a cuddle, going for a walk outside, or having a warm bath.

Give your day some structure

When you have distressing thoughts, it can often feel as though your thoughts, feelings and experiences are in control of you. This can be even more distressing.

Having structure to your days can help you feel a bit more in control. Try to find ways to structure your time so that you have a chance to connect with others, do things that you enjoy and that give you a sense of achievement. Don't forget to include times to eat well, exercise, and go outside.

If it feels too overwhelming to plan for a whole day, you could start with planning a small amount of time (for example, just 5 to 10 minutes) for activities each day, and gradually build it up. You could also set yourself 1 goal for the day to begin with, and slowly try to do more.

Take some deep breaths

Deep belly breathing is known to help you feel calmer when distressed. Try following the steps below to practice this. It can be useful at first to practise this type of breathing when you are feeling calmer, so that you are more confident using it when you are distressed.

- Find a quiet place to sit or lie down, with your back supported. Make sure you feel comfortable.
- Place a hand on your chest and the other one on your belly
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to breathe slower than normal, but make sure it still feels comfortable to you.
- Make sure that the hand on your belly is moving out when you breathe in, and moving in when you breathe out. You can imagine you're pushing a balloon into your belly. This shows you are breathing into your belly and not your chest. This type of breathing is particularly helpful when you are feeling worried or overwhelmed.
- Repeat this as many times as you want to. Remember you can always come back to this slow, deep belly breath if things are feeling more difficult.

Try 'grounding' yourself

Grounding can help us to tune out of difficult thoughts and feelings by helping us to focus on the present moment. You could try:

- naming 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel on your body, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell or taste, and then take 1 deep belly breath
- find a special or interesting object, and try to notice everything you can about it. Use all of your senses (you can touch it, look closely at it, tap it to hear the sound, or smell it)
- bring your attention to a part of your body and focus on all the sensations you can feel in this area. For example, notice the weight of your bum on the seat, or try stretching and then relax. You could even try clenching your teeth and then relaxing your jaw. The important thing is to pay attention to all the places you can feel these movements and focus on how these sensations feel
- listen to your favourite song or piece of music

Safety plan (to be completed with a parent/guardian if possible)

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

These organisations can provide support if you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts or thoughts of harming themselves. Accessing these services is confidential, but services might need to share your information with people who can support you, if they think you are at immediate risk of harm.

YoungMinds (for people under 19 years old)

web www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/

ChildLine (for people under 19 years old)

For support, **web** www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline/

For coping techniques, **web** www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/

phone 0800 1111

The Mix (for people under 25 years old)

web www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team **phone** text 'THEMIX' to 85258

Papyrus (for people under 35 years old)

web www.papyrus-uk.org

phone 0800 068 4141 or 07860 039967 (both available 9am to midnight, 365 days a year)

Samaritans (for all ages)

web www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time/

phone 116 123 **email** jo@samaritans.org who will reply within 24 hours

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

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



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