

COUNSELLING SERVICE

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# SELF-HARM AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER<sup>⌘</sup>

MIND MATTERS

## WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Self-harm is the deliberate harm or damage that someone may do to their own body with the intention of causing pain and injury. Typically a person may cut or scratch their arms, legs or face, burn parts of their body, hit fists or head against a wall, pull hair out or overdose on drugs or alcohol.

Self-harm is a response to unbearable or painful emotions. Some people may self-injure as a one-off as a response to extreme distress. For others, it may become a habitual way of coping with stress or crises.

The self-harmer may feel bewildered and frightened by what is happening and it evokes powerful emotional responses in other people who may feel distressed, angry or afraid.

The actual injury may be either serious or superficial but any self-harm indicates emotional distress and should be taken seriously. Self-harm is sometimes confused with suicidal behaviour. A person who self-harms does not necessarily intend to commit suicide but their actions may result in accidental death or serious injury.

Although, it is most often associated with young women, men and older people also self-harm. Self-harming usually begins in adolescence but it is also encountered in younger children.

## WHY DO PEOPLE HARM THEMSELVES?

For the person doing it, self-harm is not the actual problem, but is instead a way of coping with emotional pain. This may be difficult for others to understand but there are reasons why inflicting physical pain may bring some emotional relief:

- Our bodies release natural, opiate-like endorphins in response to physical pain that temporarily relieve pain and distress
- Making the preparations to inflict self-injury can provide some distraction from distressing thoughts and feelings
- Self-harm offers a way of expressing emotional pain and distress to oneself and/or to others. Some people may wish to attract help and others will hide their injuries
- Some people feel emotionally numb or dead inside and so may inflict pain in order to 'feel'
- Self-harm is often associated with low self-worth and can be an expression of anger and self-loathing. Any sense of relief is temporary and is often followed by fear or anxiety about the injuries inflicted and shame or guilt about the act or its consequences. It is similar to 'drinking to forget' and waking up with a hangover. It is often an attempt to get rid of emotional pain. Some people who harm themselves are suffering from depression, whilst others may have a history of physical, emotional or sexual abuse. The issues behind such emotional turmoil and distress are individual and varied.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

It is helpful to understand self-harm as a way of trying to cope with difficult feelings rather than as something deviant, mad or bad. You may feel overwhelmed but you can still make choices about what to do:

- It may be helpful to talk to your friends or family. It can be a relief just to tell someone else what you are going through. Some people may find it hard to understand but others will try to understand your feelings or may have had similar experiences
- Experiment with less damaging ways of expressing your feelings and getting relief. Try using a red marker pen on your skin, rubbing ice cubes against your skin or snapping a rubber band against your wrist
- You may try delaying harming yourself for a few minutes to start with and practice extending the length of time. You might try waiting until the end of a CD, or TV programme, etc. You may find that some of the intensity of feeling has passed by then
- Acknowledge that it will take time to develop less damaging ways of expressing yourself. You are likely to continue self-harming until you have established new ways of coping. Do not give yourself a hard time about slips
- If you do harm yourself, try to reduce the damage. Use sterile equipment to reduce the risk of infection. Have a first-aid kit handy. Cover cuts with a clean, dry dressing. Run cold water over burns and cover loosely with cling-film

- If you have taken a small overdose, contact your GP for advice as soon as possible. If you have taken a large overdose, or if you feel at all unwell, go to the Emergency Department at the nearest hospital
- If you have hurt or injured yourself in any other way, you need to decide whether first aid is sufficient or whether to seek medical help from the Emergency Department at the nearest hospital or from your GP
- There are many people in the University to whom you can turn for support. Initially, you may prefer to speak to someone you know, such as your personal or senior tutor, or a member of staff in your School. They will put you in touch with specialist services, if necessary. You may prefer to approach the Counselling Service, or the Students' Union
- If your difficulties are affecting your academic work, talk to your personal tutor or a member of staff in your School so that they can help you with arrangements for course work or exams.
- There are specialist organisations providing advice, information and support and you can find their details at [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](http://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

“SOME PEOPLE MAY FIND IT HARD TO UNDERSTAND BUT  
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## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- If a friend or housemate confides to you that they have self-harmed or feels the urge to do so, simply listening to them provides some relief. You do not have to come up with the answer or solve their problems
- The situation may seem very urgent and frightening, but the person is likely to have been living with this for a long time. You are not responsible for them. Unless there is a medical emergency, it is more helpful to allow them to make their own choice about what to do. Try not to get too overwhelmed. You also have your own life
- You may find it irritating or difficult to understand why someone might self-harm particularly if the actual injuries are superficial. The severity of the injuries may not reflect the intensity of distress the person feels. It may have taken the person considerable self-restraint not to inflict a more serious injury
- Hearing someone talk about harming him or herself, or seeing their scars or injuries may be upsetting for you. If you wish to talk to someone about your own feelings, you can contact the Counselling Service for confidential support
- The person who has self harmed may feel very frightened or upset. If it is a superficial injury, you might help with first aid measures and reassurance. If you think the person needs medical help, encourage them to go to the Emergency Department at the nearest hospital or their GP
- If the person has a serious injury, has overdosed or is unconscious, they will require medical help immediately. If they are not willing or able to attend hospital or their GP, you will have to take action. If the incident happens in halls or at University, tell staff. If the incident happens in your house, you must phone the emergency services.

## SUICIDE

### WHAT IS SUICIDE?

Suicide is the deliberate taking of one's own life. Sometimes the decision is taken impulsively after a period of time of feeling very low. Sometimes it takes weeks of planning. Suicidal thinking is normal. Many of us play with thoughts at some point in our lives. However the thoughts are always a sign that something is wrong for us and it is important to seek help from others.

### WHAT LEADS TO SUICIDAL THOUGHTS?

Most of us have times when we are sad and lonely and when the future seems bleak. You may feel that you are too much of a burden for people; that they would be better off without you. Failure seems inevitable. In this state of mind you may also feel very angry with the world and the people in it, but it feels impossible to express it.

It is often an event or series of events that sets off this thinking – a relationship coming to an end, a failed piece of coursework, failing to make social contact and feeling alone, feeling that you'll never have a relationship, a job or a home of your own.

Sometimes thinking about traumatic events from the past can be triggered by things going wrong now. People who have suffered rape or abuse in the past are vulnerable to having old feelings revived by current rejections or failures. People may also experience a severe lack of self worth and look like they are managing but know really that they are not.

## IS IT JUST ATTENTION-SEEKING?

No. People who talk about or attempt suicide should always be taken seriously. They need someone to understand what they have been feeling although they might find it hard to put into words. They need someone to listen and who is prepared to help.

Often warning signs are present. This may not just be one particular sign, there are often several clues that are apparent. One or more of these clues may be noticeable but this does not necessarily mean that someone is definitely contemplating suicide. The only way to make sure is to ask them.

If a person is determined to go ahead with suicide, they may work very hard at not giving out any warning signals or clues. They may really not want to be rescued at all.

Some warning signs or signals that a suicidal person may give are:

- Depression
- Recurring suicidal thoughts, dreams or fantasies
- Showing signs of sadness and hopelessness
- Loss of interest in usual activities
- Loss of energy
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Changes in behaviour
- Change in sleep patterns
- Negative comments about themselves
- Previous suicide attempts
- Talking, writing or hinting about suicide
- Giving away personal possessions

These signs are only meant as a guideline. Some people may not show any outward signs even though they are feeling suicidal. Some may show many of the signs but are coping ok. The only real way of knowing for sure is to ask.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP YOURSELF

- If you are considering suicide and you are reading this leaflet then you may be having second thoughts. Since there are many fewer people who actually kill themselves than people who think about doing it, it means that there is a very good chance that you are going to live
- Say to yourself 'I will wait 24 hours before I do anything'. Or a week. Remember that feelings and actions are two different things – just because you feel like killing yourself, does not mean that you have to actually do it. Put some distance between your suicidal feelings and suicidal action, even if it is just 24 hours. You have already done it for five minutes just by reading this leaflet
- If you are contemplating suicide, it will be motivated in part by wanting to feel better or at least to stop feeling the way you do. In order to stop feeling a particular way or to feel better, you actually need to be alive
- When feeling suicidal, talking may seem to be the last thing you want to do but the evidence is that talking helps relieve the pressure to commit suicide. Sometimes friends can listen but they may be frightened by the idea of suicide. Remember that it is not you that is frightening them, it is the idea
- There are people out there who can be with you at this horrible time, who will not judge you, or argue with you, or send you to a hospital or try to talk you out of how badly you feel. Your doctor or a counsellor can be helpful when you are in this state. You can contact the Counselling Service for help.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP SOMEONE ELSE

- It is important to ask someone you suspect of feeling suicidal, whether they are considering it or not. It is a common misconception that if you ask people if they feel suicidal, this encourages killing themselves. Most often it is quite the opposite. Asking a person who is suicidal if they are having suicidal thoughts and feelings gives them permission to feel that way, thus reducing their isolation and desperation. It shows that someone else is aware and understands just how desperate they are feeling. When a person feels isolated, they are more likely to go ahead with a suicide attempt
- When someone tells you they are having suicidal thoughts and feelings it is imperative that you listen. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. They need to know how you feel about it. Tell them outright that you do not want them to die. Try to make yourself available for them. Take them seriously. Try to extract a promise from them that when they feel suicidal they will contact you or someone that can help, like a counsellor or doctor, before they do anything. If they refuse to talk and appear determined, they may need to go directly to hospital
- It is important that you do not try and deal with the situation totally on your own. Refer them to someone who is equipped to offer the help they need while you continue to support them. The Counselling Service can help
- If the person has a serious injury, has overdosed or is unconscious, they require medical help immediately. If they are not willing or able to attend hospital or their doctor, you will have to take action. If the incident happens in halls or at University, tell staff. If the incident happens in your house, you must phone the emergency services
- If you want to help or advice on how to help someone who is feeling suicidal, contact the Counselling Service.

## WHEN IS SPECIALIST HELP APPROPRIATE?

Sometimes self-harm can be an impulsive response to a particularly difficult situation. It may be that help and support from friends and family will get you through the bad patch. If, however, you have been harming yourself for a long time, this may not be enough. Even though you might tell yourself that self-harming is helping you cope, you may worry that it is getting out of control

However, with suicide and suicidal thoughts, it is always important to seek help. It is hard to use the bit of yourself that wants to stay alive when the feelings are so strong, but there are medical and counselling services that can help you think through the crisis however bad it may feel.

Suggested forms of help include:

- Counselling to help you understand your problems and to learn different ways of coping with your thoughts and feelings
- Medication to help reduce symptoms of depression or anxiety and to allow you to regain control.

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### INSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- The **Counselling Service** offers free, confidential, individual and group counselling and workshops to all students. The Service also offers support and guidance, to those concerned about the welfare of a friend or relative. To arrange an initial appointment, telephone 020 7911 5000 ext 66899 or email [counselling@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:counselling@westminster.ac.uk). See webpage [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](https://westminster.ac.uk/counselling) for further information.
- **Disability Learning Support** offer information, support and advice with managing as a student with physical disabilities or mental health conditions. Tel 020 3506 8800 (Central London) or visit [westminster.ac.uk/disability](https://westminster.ac.uk/disability) for more info.
- The **Students' Union** offer advice and support. They can be contacted on 020 7911 5000 ext 5454 or email [su-info@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:su-info@westminster.ac.uk). Visit [uwsu.com](https://uwsu.com) for more info.
- The **Student Advice Service** offer advice and information on funding, benefits, visa and immigration matters. They can be contacted via email [studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk](mailto:studentcentre@westminster.ac.uk). See [westminster.ac.uk/advice](https://westminster.ac.uk/advice) for more info.

### OUTSIDE THE UNIVERSITY

- Your **GP** can offer you support, advice, medical treatment or referral to specialist help. All GP practices offer an out-of-hours service for emergencies.
- **London Nightline** offers a confidential telephone listening service, run by students for students, which is available from 6pm-8am every night during term-time, Tel 020 7631 0101.
- **The Samaritans** offer a listening ear 24 hours a day, Tel 116 123, this number is FREE to call.
- Information, resources and links to useful organisations can be found at [studentdepression.org](https://studentdepression.org)

Details of organisations offering help with self-harm and suicidal thoughts can be found on the Counselling Service webpage, [westminster.ac.uk/counselling](https://westminster.ac.uk/counselling)

## FURTHER READING

- **The Self-harm Help Book** by Lois Arnold and Anne Magill, offers practical ideas for reducing harm and developing alternative choices, based on the experiences of those who self-harm.

It is available for £5.50, from: The Basement Project, PO Box 5, Abergavenny, NP7 5XW.

“..THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE IN THE UNIVERSITY  
TO WHOM YOU CAN TURN TO FOR SUPPORT.”



DETAILS OF OTHER SPECIALIST HELP CAN BE FOUND AT:  
[WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING](http://WESTMINSTER.AC.UK/COUNSELLING)

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