



# Self harm Coping strategies

People can self harm for different reasons. It may be to deal with difficult feelings<sup>1</sup> or to give someone release or escape.<sup>2</sup> Some may find the physical pain of self harm distracts them from the emotional pain they are feeling.<sup>3</sup> For some they may need to self harm to let other people know how they are feeling.<sup>4</sup> Others may feel it is the only way to feel in control of their body<sup>5</sup> or to punish themselves because they feel guilty.

Learning of different ways to cope with these feelings can help in stopping the urge to self harm.<sup>6</sup>

Beating the urge to self-harm can be an uphill struggle. You may have to work hard to start using different ways of dealing with difficult feelings.<sup>7</sup> But doing this is an important step towards recovery.

Some people may find distraction or coping techniques one way to help delay or avoid self-harm. You need to find out what coping strategies work for you. You will need to have a few different strategies you can use depending on how you are feeling. The same technique may not work for every time.

It may be helpful to match your coping strategy with how you are feeling. For example you may want to do something that comforts you if you feel low or release energy if you feel angry.

This booklet goes through some different things you can try to help cope with the urge to self harm. It goes through how to distract yourself, how to do something that makes you feel better or give yourself strength.

This is not a therapy book and doesn't replace treatment. But it may be useful for you to put some alternatives to self harming in place. There are treatments available for self harming so talk to your doctor if you want to find out more about these.

## How to distract yourself from how you are feeling

You can try and distract yourself because it will give you some time to think about what you want to do or how you are feeling.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

- Draw on the area you would like to self-harm with a red pen or use fake blood or food colouring to simulate self-harm
- Bite into a chilli
- Put an elastic band or several elastic bands around your wrist and ping them to cause a stinging sensation
- Put red food dye in ice cubes and then grip them to cause numbness and have red dye released
- Wax your legs
- Put warm candle wax on yourself and then peel, rub or scratch it off
- Make a lot of noise such as playing the drums, playing music loudly or banging pots together
- Splash cold water on your face
- Cut into fruit such as a grapefruit or banana

## Release energy or tension

If you feel angry or upset you may find it useful to do something that will release energy.<sup>11</sup>

- Kick a football or throw a ball at a wall
- Do exercise such as go to the gym, go for a walk or run
- Smash a watermelon or an ice cube off the wall
- Hit a pillow or punch bag as hard as you can
- Squeeze a stress ball
- Play loud music and dance a lot
- Tear up paperwork, fabric, material or phone books
- Scream as loud as you can into an empty room or pillow
- Make a play-doh model of yourself or of something else and then smash it up
- Do yoga or tai chi
- Play a computer game such as the Wii fit or Play Station
- Pop bubble wrap
- Write all over a magazine or photos
- Stick pins in a pin cushion
- Draw faces of people you are angry with on balloons and pop them

## Be creative

If you feel low, empty or lost you may find doing something creative can help by distracting you and by doing something that you enjoy.<sup>12</sup>

- Create something that is like how you are feeling, you can draw, paint, or use clay to do this
- Write a poem, song, joke, or play about how you feel
- Take some photos of things that you like
- Create your own cartoon characters
- Sing to music or play instruments
- Make beaded bracelets or other jewellery
- Write a blog or an online journal
- Sew, knit or cross stitch, you can get tutorials online
- Change your room or home around, paint rooms or move furniture into different positions
- Write in a diary or journal
- Get a box and fill it with things that make you good, these could be photos, music, notes, cards, trinkets
- Write a different ending to your favourite film
- Write out what you want to say to someone then rip it up into tiny pieces

## Talk about how you feel<sup>13</sup>

- Call a helpline
- Call a friend
- Call your support networks
- Use online support

## Work out how you feel and then let it go

- Write words about how you feel over and over again to release it
- Imagine a colour or shape that is like how you feel, then try to turn this into a different colour or shape
- Make a list of things you feel are happy with or pleased about
- Write a list of pros and cons of self harm, how it helps you and why you don't want to do it anymore
- When you feel in a good place write a list or a letter about what is good about you, read it when you feel like self harming
- Write a list of things you are proud of in your life, this month, this day
- Ask yourself "What am I feeling?" and then "Why?"

## Things to make you feel more comforted and relaxed

- Have a bath or shower
- Have a massage
- Paint your nails or have your hair done
- Hold toys or pets in your arms
- Buy yourself something special
- Eat something you really like
- Watch your favourite film, just not a tear jerker!
- Have a nap
- Make yourself something nice to eat
- Wrap up in blankets
- Listen to your favourite feel good songs
- Buy or make a recovery bracelet
- Mediate or use relaxation
- Light some incense
- Sit in the park or outside and pay attention to nature, listen to the sounds, really look at plants or flowers, look at the clouds.



## Start a task or do something

- Go out to see someone you like
- Clean your room or house
- Go online to a chat room or blog
- Watch TV
- Read a book
- Play a game on your phone such as Candy Crush
- Learn something new from a local centre or using online tutorials such as origami
- Make a paper chain and add a new chain each time you don't self-harm
- Go for a day out such as the zoo, the park, museums etc.
- Go for a swim, walk or drive
- Make a t-shirt using transfers or patches
- Listen to jokes or comedy
- Write yourself a to do list
- Cook something you have not cooked before
- Research something you don't know much about
- Listen to a podcast such as *No Such Thing as a Fish*, *Answer Me This!* or *Oh No, Ross and Carrie!*
- Do some gardening
- Skateboard or rollerblade
- Go shopping
- Wash your car
- Have a spring clean and give things you don't want to charity
- Read an inspirational blog
- Make a list about what positive changes you have made in your life



## Give yourself time

When you feel like self harming give yourself a bit of time before you do it. This will allow you a chance to not act impulsively.

- Keep things you harm yourself with in a locked cupboard or in a box with Sellotape around it. When you are taking the tape off you have time between wanting to self-harm and doing it.
- Phone Rethink Gloucestershire Self-harm Helpline. Come up with some strategies about how to not self harm. Agree to call them in an hour or two and tell them how it went.
- All the suggestions we already discussed can be useful to delay self harming.
- Wait 10 or 15 minutes to decide if your urge to self harm is still as strong. You can decide what to do at this point.

## Reasoning with yourself

When you're not feeling like self-harming, write out why you self harm and why you don't want to self harm. This list will be different for each person, it's whatever makes sense to you. It may be helpful to look at the list when you feel like self harming. Answer the questions below.

I self harm because it makes me feel \_\_\_\_\_ for a while.

When the \_\_\_\_\_ feeling wears off I feel \_\_\_\_\_

For example:

I self harm because it makes me feel calmer for a while.

When the feeling wears off I feel worried because I have gone too far.

Below are some of the things you could be feeling:

- "I've managed for two weeks without harming. I don't want to start again"
- "Once I start it's difficult to stop"
- "It doesn't help in the long run. I can self harm now but I'll need to do it again in a couple of days."
- "I don't want to end up in hospital"
- "If I can hang on the need to self-harm sometimes passes"
- "There may be consequences I don't want e.g. brain damage, paralysis"
- "I will feel bad if I self-harm now"



## Making yourself safe

- Try to work out situations that make you feel like self harming. Once you've done this you can try and avoid them or prepare for them
- Try avoiding things that you might use to harm yourself
- Stay with a friend
- Ask your GP to give you a weekly prescriptions or pick up medication for two days at a time from the chemist
- Don't buy lots of tablets, if you notice this is happening flush them away or give them to someone to hold for you until you feel better

## Rewarding yourself for not self-harming

- Keep a chart – add a star for each day or hour you have not self-harmed. If you do self-harm, just leave a space and start again
- Call a helpline or a friend and talk about positive times where you have managed to not self-harm. This stops the focus from always being on the negative



# Questions to ask before you self-harm

If you can recognise the triggers or thoughts involved in the build up to self-harm, you may be able to use alternative coping strategies before the urge gets too strong.

Try asking yourself the following questions.

- Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has happened that I feel like this?
- Have I felt like this before? How did I come out the other side the last time? Can I do that again now?
- Is there anything else I can do to get rid of this feeling that doesn't mean I will hurt myself?
- How does self-harming make you feel? If it makes you feel in control, think of things you could do to get the same feeling but without hurting yourself

## Things to do before you self-harm

- Remind yourself:
  - I've been through painful situations before and I survived
  - I am strong enough to get through this
  - This is a horrible feeling but it will go away
- Write down things you like about yourself and why you want to stop self-harming so you can review it at times you're feeling low
- The 15-minute rule – if you're feeling the urge to self-harm, give yourself 15 minutes before you do. Distract yourself by going for a run or writing down your feelings. When the time's up, see if you can extend it by another 15 minutes. Try to keep going until the urge subsides
- Visualisation - try to picture the urge as an emotional wave you can surf. Imagine it reaching a crescendo then breaking as you successfully resist its force

# Other useful techniques

## Deep breathing

Lots of people don't realise how useful deep breathing until they've tried it. If you learn how to do deep breathing it can be really helpful. Sit straight on a chair and put one hand gently on your chest and one hand gently on your stomach. Slowly breathe in, feeling the air expanding your lungs. Your stomach should move outwards as the air fills you. Hold the breath for a moment, then breathe out as deeply as possible. This can help to calm you down in situations when you feel panicked. You can get free guided breathing exercises online such as on YouTube.

## Safe place imagery

What is your happiest memory? It might have been a holiday or day trip you had, it might have been a birthday party or a day at school. Think about this time. Think about all the things you liked about it, how you felt, what actually happened. Try to remember in great detail. When you've done this you can close your eyes and really concentrate on this place and this should help your upset/ angry feelings to leave you. You can listen to guided imagery meditations for free online until you get the hang of it.

## Relaxation albums

There are all different types of relaxation albums. Some have nice sounds such as the sound of the sea. Others have someone talking in a calm and reassuring way. You could find it useful to listen to one of these. You can download a lot of these to MP3.

## Muscle relaxation

If you are feeling tense you can use something called progressive muscle relaxation. This is when you tense your body and then relax it. It can help to be aware of how tense you feel and let go of it. You can download guides to help you do this or watch tutorials online.

## Practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is a process of making sure you and your thoughts are in the here and now and staying grounded. Mastering this technique can be useful if you have a lot of painful thoughts from the past which can trigger self harm.<sup>xiv</sup> Below is one example of a mindfulness exercise. Really learning this can take a long time so don't give up if you don't feel you're getting it at the start, it will come!

Sit in a quiet space in a chair with your feet on the floor. Hold something in your hand. Look at the object, notice how it feels in your hand.

- How heavy is it?
- What temperature is it?
- Is it sharp, rough or smooth?
- What shape is it?
- What colour is it?
- How does it smell?
- Think of its use

You may find that your mind wanders or that thoughts pop into your head. That's OK, don't get upset if this happens. When another thought comes into your head just realise it has happened, then go back to what you were doing. You may need to do this 100s of times before you have a session where it doesn't happen.

## Affirmations

Affirmations are phrases you say to yourself. It should be something good about you or something that you want to achieve. You should repeat these a few times during the day. Slowly they will start to be part of your natural way of thinking. They can be ones you made up or famous quotes you believe in.

### Examples are:

- I am a good person
- I can deal with any challenges that I face
- I can achieve what I want to achieve
- I choose to forgive and let go of the past
- I am the captain of my soul

## Re-framing

Re-framing a situation is where you try to turn a situation which you first see as negative as a positive or different. This can help you feel less affected by a difficult situation. It can help you to see situations from a different perspective and take the self-blame and anxiety out of a situation.

### Examples are:

Current situation and feeling

“My friend has not contacted me this week. I have obviously upset them and they aren't talking to me anymore.”

Re-framed situation and feeling

“My friend has not contacted me this week. I know she has lots of things going on at the moment and may be busy. I will call her over the next few days and see how she is.”

Current situation and feeling

“Every time my wife does the hoovering she leaves the Hoover out. She knows this annoys me and yet she keeps doing it.”

Re-framed situation and feeling

“Every time my wife does the hoovering she leaves the Hoover out. Maybe she just wants me to know she has done it and thank her. At least it is done and I don't have to do it now.”

Current situation and feeling

“My boss has asked to see me. I must have done something wrong.”

Re-framed situation and feeling  
“My boss has asked to see me. I am happy with my work and know I am doing well. Maybe they want to praise me for my work or may be giving me extra responsibilities.”

### Invisible circle

The invisible circle is designed to help you stop thinking negatively about yourself.

Imagine a circle in a room, which is big enough to fit you inside it. This is a power circle. Every day stand in your circle and say one of your affirmations out loud 5 times.

Then when you start to feel upset, angry or vulnerable, stand in the circle and repeat your affirmation to yourself until you feel safer.

### Stop signs

Sometimes, we find ourselves saying critical, hurtful things to ourselves without even realising it. This is your “inner critic”. This is the voice inside you that keeps telling you how bad you are. It can be a very powerful force sometimes.

One way of making this inner critic stop is to make a list of the most common negative things you say about yourself, and then write an affirmation to counter it. The next time you hear that critical voice in your head, imagine a big red STOP sign. Pause, take a deep breath, and say an affirmation over and over in your head instead.

Don't be discouraged if it seems to take a long time and your thought processes don't appear to become less negative – remember that you have been thinking negatively for a long time, and it will take as much time to get back out of that habit.

But that's all it is, a habit. People give up bad habits, or change their habits all the time. So can you. Persevere, and gradually your thought processes will change.

**For more information about self-harm contact the Rethink Gloucestershire Self Harm Helpline on 0808 801 0606.**

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<sup>1</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists' Public Education Editorial Board. *Self-harm*.

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/self-harm.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/self-harm.aspx) [ Accessed May 2016]

<sup>2</sup> Long, M. & Jenkins, M. Counsellor's perspectives on self-harm and the role of therapeutic relationship for working with clients who self-harm. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. (2010) 10(3); 192-200

<sup>3</sup> Rayner, G. & Warner, S. *Self-harming behaviour: from lay perceptions to clinical practice*. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*. 2003 Vol. 16(4), 305–329.

<sup>4</sup> Kilburn, E. & Whitlock, J.L. (2009). Distraction techniques and alternative coping strategies. The Practical Matters Series, Cornell Research Program on Self-Injury and Recovery. Cornell University. Ithaca, NY

<sup>5</sup> As note 3

<sup>6</sup> As note 4

<sup>7</sup> Middleton, K, Garvie, S. *Self Harm – The Path to Recovery*. Oxford: Lion Hudson plc; 2008

<sup>8</sup> McKay, M., Wood, J.C. & Brantley, J. *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook. Practical DBT Exercises For Learning Mindfulness, Interpersonal Effectiveness, Emotional Regulation And Distress Tolerance*. (2007) Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> National Self Harm Network. *Distractions that help...* [www.nshn.co.uk/downloads/Distractions.pdf](http://www.nshn.co.uk/downloads/Distractions.pdf) [Accessed May 2016]

<sup>10</sup> Self injury support. *Distractions to self-harm...*

[www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/files/docs/Catergories%20of%20distractions%20in%20bubbles\\_1.pdf](http://www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk/files/docs/Catergories%20of%20distractions%20in%20bubbles_1.pdf) [Accessed May 2016]

<sup>11</sup> As note 4

<sup>12</sup> Erkkilä, J. et al. Individual music therapy for depression: randomised controlled trial. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*. July 2011;199 (2); 132-139.

<sup>13</sup> As note 4

<sup>xiv</sup> Lynch, T.R. et al. Mechanisms of change in dialectical behavior therapy: Theoretical and empirical observations. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2006;62(4). 459-480.