



From hurting to healing: Ways you can cope with self-injury

This resource discusses self-injury or self-harm and provides options for those experiencing its mental health impacts. It has been prepared by a post-secondary student as source of information and support and should not replace professional expertise.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is defined as hurting yourself on purpose without intending to end your life.¹ This includes inflicting any kind of damage to the body, using alcohol or substances (legal substances, over-the-counter medications, or illegal substances), or engaging in self-destructive and impulsive behaviours.¹

People will sometimes use self-harm to cope when they are dealing with intense feelings or emotional distress. A person who engages in self-harm usually doesn't mean to cause harm to the extent of ending their life. However, if they don't seek help for self-harming, they are at a higher risk of attempting suicide.²

If you are self-harming, you're not alone. In a 2021 study involving over 2,600 students at the University of Western Ontario about 25% reported they engaged in self-harm and 33% thought about harming themselves.³ Studies in other industrialized countries show that about 15% to 25% of post-secondary students engaged in self-harm.^{4,5,6}

Some people are more likely to engage in self-harm, such as women^{3,6}, people who identify as 2SLGBTQ+^{6,7}, and those with a history of mental health problems, particularly depression⁴ and eating disorders.⁸





Understanding the triggers for self-harm

The injuries or actions from self-harm can give a voice to someone's emotional pain or provide a distraction by transforming it into physical pain.⁹ It may also offer a sense of relief or control to help cope with emotional distress.¹⁰

Self-harming may seem to provide short-term relief, but the overpowering or difficult emotions can often come back. Using self-harm as a way of coping will not be beneficial for the long term.¹¹

It's important to be aware that self-harming can come from many factors. Recognizing these factors can be a valuable first step in managing the urge to self-harm.

- **Distressing emotions.** These are the primary triggers for self-harm.¹² Feelings of isolation, depression, shame, or emptiness may be associated with self-harm triggers. Life situations could lead someone to engage in self-harm, especially situations in which people feel rejected based on things beyond their control – like gender, sexual identity, race, or origin – or when they feel shamed, confused, or guilty.^{12,13}
- **Interpersonal experiences.** Tension or overwhelming emotions related to relationships, expectations, or environments can contribute to self-harm.¹⁴ Fallouts of relationships or being unable to meet other people's expectations may lead to isolating from others and could negatively impact self-esteem. This might happen in relationships at home, school, work, or with friends.¹²
- **Coping.** Guilt and shame can bring on feelings of low self-worth and self-esteem.¹⁵ People who have experienced abuse-related trauma – verbal, emotional, physical – may engage in self-harm, to either punish themselves for their emotions and thoughts or to regain control over those emotions.¹⁴

What are other options?

The urge to self-harm can be strong, especially if you've done it in the past and it made you feel better, even temporarily. However, we know that self-harm can be dangerous. It can impact your emotional well-being, negatively affect relationships, and leave serious physical and mental permanent marks on your body.^{4,16}

Although it can be difficult to stop self-harming, there are other things you can do to cope with your feelings and gain a sense of relief or control.¹²

- **Personalize it.** Self-harm can be triggered by many different situations and emotions.¹² It's important to explore and identify your personal triggers and learn more about why and how they affect you. Being aware of these triggers can help you divert them.^{12,17}
- **Connect.** Being with friends or loved ones can help you feel less isolated. Confide in your loved ones and those you trust, as they may be able to support you if they know you are struggling. They might provide advice, connect you with resources, and identify positive steps you can take.

Explore new ways to cope. Be open to looking for new ways to deal with your emotions. The way you feel after trying a new coping method (instead of using self-harm) may feel different at first. However, this can adjust over time as you discover alternatives and develop new coping skills. Here are some things you could try.^{12,18,19}

- Express yourself with art. Creating art of all kinds – drawing, painting, poetry, singing, playing a musical instrument – can be a form of personal expression and emotional release. You could try drawing on the body part you usually injure.
- Writing down and journaling your emotions can help you identify your triggers. If you are getting external support, you can share your journal with that person, to help them understand and help you move forward.
- You can experiment with harmless diversion techniques and substitutes, like snapping elastic plastic bands on your wrist, eating sour sweets, or squeezing ice cubes.
- Try relaxation techniques like deep breathing and listening to music.
- Engaging in physical activity, even low-key and for short periods of time, can help release emotions. Find an activity you like and make efforts to do it, either by yourself or with others.



Make a plan. Plan ahead for how you can keep yourself safe.

- Have an emergency contact person (one who has already agreed) to call if you feel you may harm yourself.
- Go to a place you feel safe and away from harmful objects. This could be anywhere – your bedroom or a favourite nature spot, for example.
- Engage in a hobby that you know will take your mind off self-harm urges or until you can meet with or speak to someone.
- Save 24/7 crisis hotlines in your phone. Service providers can give you some ideas and direction in difficult times. Here are some:
 - Canada's National Suicide and Crisis Hotline (**988**).
 - Talk Suicide Canada (**1-800-456-4566**).
 - Good 2 Talk (**1-866-925-5454**).

It's important to remember that everyone's situation is unique. Ways to cope that work for one person may not work for you, and what works for you now may change in the future.^{12,17} However, if you are ready to try to stop self-harming, these options are worth considering.



When it's time to seek help

Does all of this resonate with you? Are you feeling overwhelmed by intense emotions? Do you know someone who may be in a situation where they are self-harming? If so, it may be time to look for external help.

It's important to know that helpful and compassionate support is there for you, whether it's a mental health professional, a medical professional, an Elder, a caring adult, or a specialized helpline.^{12,20}

Reaching out isn't always easy. The way you feel about asking others for help can be affected by social stigma and people's negative attitudes about self-harm. In fact, social attitudes can act as barriers when it comes to sticking with treatment, and can even affect the effectiveness of the treatment itself.²¹

When you are ready to ask for help, here are some resources.

- **Anonymous helplines.** If you would like accessible, anonymous support to begin your healing journey, you can call or text [Good2Talk](#).
- **911 and 988.** In any self-harm situation where you may not be able to treat your injuries, don't ever hesitate to call 911, or the new suicide crisis helpline 988, for professional medical assistance. They can also provide you with resources that you may not have access to on your own.
- **Apps.** Try out these apps, which were specifically developed by clinical psychologists for young people: [Calm Harm](#)²² or [Blue Ice](#)²³.

For loved ones

If you are a loved one of someone who self-harms, it's important to realize that support doesn't always have to come from outside professionals. You can support your loved one at any stage of their journey.

Educating yourself on self-harm can provide some insight on how you can best provide support. As well, being informed and aware can prevent judgement when someone confides in you, allowing your response and actions to be proactive and not reactive.²⁴ If you do find yourself judging your loved one, swap your judgements with actions – like suggesting they seek help or explore alternatives to self-harm.

You may feel that you're not able to provide support directly to your loved one. In that case, you can suggest they try some coping options (like those we've mentioned), connect them with helpful resources (see below), or initiate personal conversations with them.

Regardless of how you are supporting a loved one, it's important to seek help for your own self-care along the way.²⁵ Talk to a counselor or find a support group for your personal mental health and well-being.^{25,26}





Resources



Looking for other resources for yourself or a loved one? Have a look at the list below for some more information.

- **Canadian Mental Health Association:** Learn more about [young people and self-injury](#)
- **Ementalhealth.ca:** Fact sheets for [young people](#) and [loved ones](#) to learn more about how to stop self-harming
- **Mayo Clinic:** Learn more about the [symptoms, risks and prevention](#)
- **Mental Health Commission of Canada:** Learn about how to [prevent intentional injuries](#)
- **SiOS: Self-Injury Outreach and Support (sioutreach.org)** specifically for post-secondary students in Canada, including stories, resources, and moderated online support groups.²⁷

For friends and loved ones

- [Coping with self-harm – a guide for parents and carers - Orygen, Revolution in Mind;](#)
- **Support for families:** [Self harm - CHEO](#)
- **Videos, books, lectures, and other resources from** [SAFE \(Self-Abuse Finally Ends\) Alternatives®](#)



The content for this resource was written by a post-secondary student for post-secondary students with the guidance of staff and youth advisors from the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions, Kids Help Phone, Ontario 211, and Connex Ontario. No content should be taken as medical advice or replaced by information or guidance from a qualified healthcare professional.

If you or someone you know is experiencing or considering self-harm as a post-secondary student, you or they can reach out to one of our professional counsellors or volunteer crisis responders 24/7. We're [Good2Talk](#) whenever you need us!

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