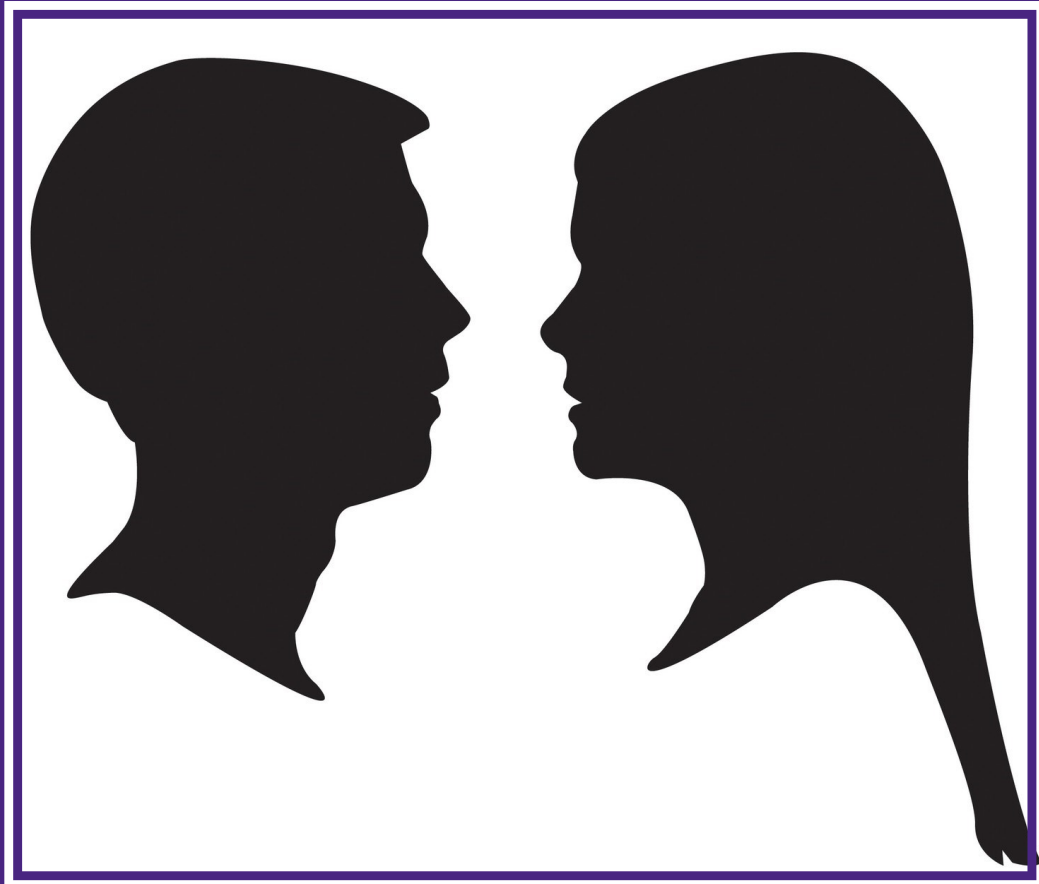


Oxford Spires Academy

Coping with Self-Harm

A Guide for Parents and Carers



This guide has been developed to support you, as parents and carers, in recognising and helping your child cope with self-harm.

It is difficult to understand precisely how many young people self-harm as very few may report it. However, it is thought that around 13% of young people may try to hurt themselves between the ages of 11 and 16. Recent figures suggest that the prevalence of self-harm is increasing, with 70% increases in those admitted to hospitals for self-harm injuries. It is therefore vital for us to be equipped to recognise concerning signs and support your child both inside and outside of school.

What is self-harm?

Self-harm is behaviour that is done deliberately to harm oneself.

Self-harm can include, for example:

- Self-cutting
- Taking an overdose
- Hitting or bruising
- Intentionally taking too little or too much medication
- Burning

Although some people who self-harm may be suicidal, self-harm is often used as a way of managing difficult emotions without being a suicide attempt. However, self-harming can result in accidental death.

What makes a young person vulnerable to self-harming?

Individual Factors: e.g., depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, poor problem-solving, impulsivity, eating disorders, drug or alcohol abuse, bullying (e.g., because of race or sexuality)

Family Factors: e.g., mental health difficulties in the family, poor parental relationships, drug/alcohol misuse in the family, unreasonable expectations, conflict between young person and parents, excessive punishments or restrictions, family history of self-harm, abuse, neglect

Social Factors: difficulties in peer relationships, bullying, peer rejection, abuse, availability of methods of self-harm, friends who self-harm, media and internet influences

Is your child self-harming?

As a parent, you might suspect your child is self-harming. If you are worried, watch out for these signs:

- Unexplained cuts, burns or bruises
- Keeping themselves covered; avoiding swimming or changing clothes around others
- Being withdrawn or isolated from friends and family
- Low mood, lack of interest in life or depression
- Blaming themselves for problems or expressing feelings of failure, uselessness, hopelessness or anger

Finding out about self-harm

Some children may tell their parents about their self-harm; other parents find out from friends, teachers or medical staff. Discovering that your child is self-harming can be very upsetting and stressful.

Parents may experience a range of emotions, including anger, sadness, helplessness, shame or disgust. It is normal to feel strong emotions and important to try and understand and accept them so that you don't risk misdirecting them at your child. Try to think of their behaviour as an expression of deep emotions they can't handle any other way.

Supporting your child

- Have a conversation, but don't bring up self-harm straight away
- You could organise this around another activity, like a walk or drive
- Ask if anything is worrying them and how they are feeling
- Let them know you are not judging them or putting them down, and that you love them and that will not change
- Show that you are prepared to listen to what your child has to say. If your child does not want to talk, see if they will write you a note, email or text message about how they feel
- Ask if they would rather speak to someone else (e.g., a GP, counsellor or helpline). If your child is able to be open about their self-harm, try to help them work out feelings and situations that may trigger it
- Try to think together of ways to handle strong feelings that don't involve self-harm
- Help them think through their problems and see possible solutions. Encourage them to think about the long view and how things may change in the future

Other ways to help

- Take talk of suicide very seriously
- Don't let self-harm become the focus of your relationship with your child
- Try to deal with self-harm in a matter-of-fact manner
- Let your child know that their emotions are real and important
- Remind your child of their strengths and abilities
- Reassure them that you do not think they are a failure whatever their difficulties
- Explain to your child that you want to help but may not know the best thing to do, and try to come up with a solution together (e.g., visiting the GP)
- Work out with your child how to make it more difficult for them to self-harm (e.g., by storing medication securely or removing sharp objects)
- Watch for signs of bullying or abuse that may be triggering self-harm

Sources of help

It is important to seek support, not just for your child, but also for yourself.

At Oxford Spires Academy, your child has several people available for their support at all times during the school day. If you can, encourage them to speak to us and tell us what is happening. You might consider your child's Head of Year, Pastoral Support Team or Tutor in the first instance. They can support your child in school and arrange for the school counsellor to be involved.

Alternatively, your child can contact the school nurse directly for advice.

Managing injuries from self-harm

If you are concerned about a wound (e.g., if it is too deep to manage at home) or other serious injuries, you should seek emergency medical help through your local Accident and Emergency service.

Overdoses:

- Get your child to an emergency department as soon as possible
- Try to find out what they have taken and tell emergency medical staff
- If your child won't tell you, look around for empty pill bottles or blister packs

Cuts and Wounds:

- Apply pressure to bleeding cuts using a bandage or towel (a tea towel may be less likely to stick to the wound)
- Clean the wound under running tap water and apply a sterile adhesive dressing
- If the wound has become infected (e.g., swelling, pus forming or spreading redness), encourage your child to seek medical help

Burns:

- Cool with cold water for 10 to 30 minutes, then cover with cling film
- Don't use ice or any creams or greasy substances such as butter

For more information on handling wounds and burns, and information about when to see a doctor, see www.nhs.uk or ring NHS Direct on 111.

Scars:

- If your child has scars they are embarrassed about, you can look into commercial products that may help them fade
- Scars can also be covered by makeup
- Remind your child that most scars will eventually fade

Help for parents and carers

Professional Help:	• GPs	• Counsellors/Therapists
Helplines and Online Information/ Support:	• YoungMinds www.youngminds.org.uk Parent Helpline: 0808 802 5544 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm)	• Samaritans 116 123 www.samaritans.org
	• Mind (over 18s only) www.mind.org.uk	• Rethink www.rethink.org
	• Harmless www.harmless.org.uk	• Royal College of Psychiatrists www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/parentsandyounginfo/parentscarers/self-harm.aspx

Help for young people

Professional Help:	GPs, School Counsellors, School Nurses, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services* (* Usually through referral by GP or other professional)
Helplines and Online Information/ Support:	• YoungMinds - www.youngminds.org.uk
	• Childline - Tel: 0800 1111, www.childline.org
	• Samaritans -Tel: 116 123, www.samaritans.org
	• Harmless - www.harmless.org.uk

Further Reading:

“The Parent’s Guide to Self-Harm” by Jane Smith, Oxford: Lion Hudson.