

SELF HARM AWARENESS DAY 2027

No One Weathers the Storm Alone
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#SHAD2027 • #SelfHarmAwarenessDay



Talking About Self Harm

 **HARMLESS**
the centre of excellence for
self harm & suicide prevention

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Talking About Self Harm

It is important to recognise that supporting someone who self harms can be very challenging. Knowing that someone you care about is in emotional distress can create many feelings including fear, anger, frustration and helplessness. You may feel unsure about how to offer support or how to begin the discussion.

Always remember that the individual you are supporting is in distress and that their actions are not intended to make you suffer. This guide was created to share some tips that can help start a conversation about self harm with someone you care about.

DON'T ASSUME

Self harm can look different for every person and can change over time. What one person feels or does to cope may be very different from someone else. Don't assume that you know what is going on unless you have heard the person describe things in their own words. Ask – and keep asking – because their situation and reasons may shift.

People self harm for many reasons, which can vary from incident to incident. Give them space to explain what's happening for them each time.

LISTENING

Listening is a vital skill. Truly hearing someone means paying attention not only to their words, but also to what they leave unsaid and to their body language – even when it feels uncomfortable. In busy environments, creating the time and space to listen can be hard, but it matters.

People often say that being listened to is one of the most helpful parts of their recovery. It gives them a chance to express their difficulties, understand their feelings and consider new choices. Feeling heard also validates their experiences, which is especially important for people who self harm and may have been dismissed in the past with comments like 'stop being a drama queen' or 'you're overreacting'.

Your conversation with them may be their first real experience of being heard. Recognise the privilege of that role and make the most of it – you may be the person best placed to listen.

DON'T OVERREACT OR TAKE CONTROL

People who self harm often feel scared and out of control. Self harm may be their way of coping and regaining a sense of control, and it helps to keep this in mind.

Self harm is not the same as a suicide attempt. It is a way for someone to manage overwhelming emotions. Avoid assuming their intentions or making decisions for them. If you are concerned about suicide risk, ask them directly rather than guessing.

When action is needed – such as contacting a GP or breaching confidentiality – remember how frightening this can feel to someone already struggling. Wherever possible, involve them in decisions, keeping them informed and empowered, rather than reinforcing feelings of helplessness.

ASK QUESTIONS CLEARLY & DIRECTLY

If you're concerned about whether someone is self harming, the best way to ask them is clearly and directly.

Avoid using judgemental phrasing such as 'Have you done something silly?', because this creates shame. An example of a clear and direct question is 'Have you coped with this by self harming?', said in a kind, compassionate, and supportive tone of voice.

DON'T JUDGE

Talking about self harm is extremely difficult, and judgement or hostility can be deeply damaging. Self harm isn't attention-seeking – it's a coping strategy. Emotions are experienced physically, and some people use self harm to escape overwhelming feelings, at least in the short term.

People need understanding and compassion if they are to make changes. They self harm not because they want to, are weak or seek attention, but because they are doing their best to manage painful emotions and experiences.

SEE THEM

A person's coping methods are only one part of who they are. Look beyond the self harm and relate to them as you would anyone else. Focus on their feelings, not just on whether they've harmed themselves. When we give attention only after self harm, we may unintentionally reinforce the behaviour by implying their distress only matters then. Their distress matters regardless of whether they have harmed themselves or not.

SEE THEIR POTENTIAL

When someone is struggling, it can be hard to see a way forward. Remember, the most important thing you can offer is hope. Even when they feel lost, help them see their potential and a future worth moving toward. Sometimes you may need to have hope for them when they cannot see it for themselves. Remember, a person is more than their problems. Encourage them to talk about their interests, passions and opinions – these aspects help them feel seen as a whole, three-dimensional person, not just a set of difficulties.

DON'T LABEL

Labels shape how we see and relate to each other. It's important to look beyond them and consider how we'd feel if those same labels were applied to us. Calling someone a 'self harmer' can turn a behaviour into an identity, reinforcing stigma and influencing how others respond. Self harm is a behaviour – something someone may or may not do – not who they are.



NOTICE

When people struggle with their mood or urges to self harm, they often feel alone. Having someone notice and offer a chance to talk can be deeply helpful.

'I often find it hard to tell someone how I am feeling, but if they notice, and they ask... I am more likely to tell them and talk about it'

– Harmless Service User

Although today's culture encourages 'it's OK not to be OK' and help-seeking, reaching out when you're in distress can still feel incredibly difficult. Instead of placing all the responsibility on the individual to seek help, we can shift toward help-offering – as friends, family, coworkers or community members.

Noticing someone's suffering and reaching out can be a lifeline. Don't be afraid to be that person. Talking about self harm won't cause it – but it might ease someone's pain.

BE KIND

Compassion and understanding are the most important things people need when trying to overcome difficulties. Yet those who self harm often feel ashamed and expect rejection, which isolates them further. We may look for 'someone better' to help, but the most powerful intervention we each have is simple, immediate kindness. In moments of despair, compassion can save lives. Always be kind.

'When I self harm I feel lost and totally alone... it's not just the qualified professionals offering me their interventions that have helped, it is the times when they have taken time out to let me know that I matter, or when they have offered me a cup of tea. Those times have helped me to feel that life was worth living, and I was worth bothering with... you can say the wrong thing, in the right way, and if you say it with care and kindness, it will change someone's life!'

– Harmless Service User

This is a vital reminder: in focusing on interventions, we can forget how much the small, human moments matter. You may not always say the perfect thing, but if you speak with honesty and kindness, your compassion will be felt. Being kind doesn't create dependency – when boundaries are respected, it simply shows people that they matter.

GIVE THINGS TIME & BE PATIENT

Relationships and change take time. Many people who self harm struggle to trust others or fear judgement, rejection or pressure to stop. Be patient, consistent and allow the relationship to develop at its own pace.

Recovery from self harm is often slow, and things may even get worse before they improve. This doesn't mean you're doing something wrong – opening up about painful feelings can initially increase self harm urges.

'When I started to open up about the self harm, I started to think about it more, and do it more. It scared me. I thought I was losing control'

– Harmless Service User

Don't give up if someone continues to self harm. Don't measure progress solely by whether the behaviour stops. Instead, talk with them about what feels helpful, explore their distress, and focus on how they're thinking and feeling overall. As the underlying issues ease and resilience grows, the need to self harm usually decreases.

You may not witness the final stages of someone's recovery, but your support can still be crucial. Stay committed, patient and hopeful – even if the change happens after your part in their journey ends.



Produced by Harmless

info@harmless.org.uk • www.harmless.org.uk • 0115 880 0280
Harmless CIC, 1 Beech Avenue, Nottingham NG7 7LJ

