

Finding that a person you care for is harming themselves can bring about a large range of thoughts and feelings: fear, distress, confusion, worry, anger, anxiety and self blame.

Your first reactions may be to remove the things that they may be using to harm themselves, be forceful in seeking help (i.e. urgently seeing a GP), apply pressure on them to talk, or be confrontational. Self harm is primarily a coping strategy. Until the reasons behind the self harm have been explored taking away their ability to cope can be very detrimental. The table contained within this leaflet gives you more detailed do's and don'ts.

A common fear is that a loved one is feeling suicidal. Whilst some individuals that self harm may have suicidal feelings, these are likely to originate from the issues behind the self harm rather than the self harm itself. Self harm, as a coping mechanism, is very often a way of avoiding suicide by releasing thoughts, feelings and emotions.

The reasons behind self harm will need to be addressed when the individual is ready and with the right care and support. Appropriate professional help may be needed. Whilst these reasons are being worked through the greatest support you can offer is a listening ear.

Distractions can be a powerful way of diverting feelings of self harm or finding other ways to express thoughts and feelings such as poetry, art, sport etc. Alternatives to self harm such as ice cubes on the skin, flicking elastic bands or drawing on the skin with red pens can also help.

Contact NSHN for a full distraction list.

Things not to do...

Things to do...

Ask them what, if anything they would like you to do to help	Don't assume what they need and want or take any action without discussing it and being sure that they are comfortable with it
If they are willing to talk about it – recommend and encourage them to seek professional help, coping strategies, support groups, support forums etc.	Don't force them into going to get help and take control away from them. (They may not be ready. Forcing this may cause them to withdraw from you.)
Let them remain in control as much as possible (Many people who self harm feel they have a lack of control over their lives and feelings etc.)	Don't try to make them stop self harming (e.g. by removing self harm tools) or give them ultimatums or do things that they aren't comfortable with. Never ask them to 'promise' they won't harm themselves. This will only add more pressure and lead to guilt for any further self harm
Learn as much as you can about self harm	Never jump to conclusions
Try and be understanding	Don't tell them what they are doing is wrong or be judgemental
Show them that you care and can see the person beyond the self harm	Don't change your perspective of them as a person (They are an individual, not a 'self-harmer')
Be positive. Try and focus on their strengths	Don't be negative, their self harm does not change everything about them
If they tell you they have just self harmed, stay calm and ask if they want to talk about it or need any medical help (Despite how you may feel, try not to show it)	Don't get angry with them, shout at them, or show shock after individual episodes of self harm (You may feel this way but expressing it may cause more harm and make the individual feel guilty)
Get help for dealing with and understanding your own feelings and emotions	Don't blame yourself or take it personally
Only help as much as you feel able too. You need to look after your own health too. You need to maintain some self preservation, supporting someone else can be emotionally draining	Don't blame them for making you worry or talk about how much this is impacting on you, this may make them feel even more guilty and lead to further self harm
Offer ideas for distractions – talk about things not related to self harm, watch a film together, go for a walk together etc but respect requests for time on their own	Don't assume that they always need to talk about the self harm if they are low or not allow them any time and space alone

Things to do...

Things not to do...

Open up methods of communication	Don't force them to talk about it
Give them the option to come to talk to you if they want to	Don't make them feel that this is something that should be kept secret and is wrong to talk about or that they 'have' to talk about it
Ask them if they want to talk about what, if anything led to the individual episode of self harm	Don't assume every episode of self harm is for the same reason

nshn

The National Self Harm Network



Advice for friends, family & carers

Contact us at:

NSHN, Po Box 7264, Nottingham NG1 6WJ

Email: info@nshn.co.uk

Website & Support Forum: www.nshn.co.uk

A registered charity number: 1106336

A company limited by guarantee: 04305979



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