



## Self-harm

The UK has one of the highest rates of self-harm in Europe, at



Self-poisoning and self-injury in adults,  
Clinical Medicine, 2002

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm is a physical response to an emotional pain and can affect males and females of all ages. Cutting might be the best known form, but self-harm can involve a whole range of behaviours including bruising, scratching, eating disorders, self-poisoning and illicit drug use. It's important someone's self-harm isn't measured by the severity of their injury, but more by the degree of underlying emotional distress.

### What causes self-harm?

Self-harm usually develops as a way of dealing with difficult feelings or emotions. It has a variety of causes and triggers, and it often accompanies other emotional and mental health problems, such as depression and eating disorders.

### Can it be treated?

Treatment varies according to individual need. Psychological interventions such as **counselling** or **cognitive behavioural therapy** help some people, whereas others may require **medication** to treat any underlying depression. Inpatient treatment isn't common but may be an option.

Most people benefit greatly from the opportunity to talk about how they're feeling, and why self-harm seems to help, before exploring alternative ways of coping. A **supportive network** of family and friends can make a real difference.

### What about faith?

Philip Yancey says: 'There's nothing we can do to make God love us more and there's nothing we can do to make God love us less' (<http://philipyancey.com/q-and-a-topics/grace>). This is very helpful when we think about self-harm: the act of harming ourselves does not change God's view of us.

The Bible says we're 'fearfully and wonderfully made' (Psalm 139:14), and that our bodies are a 'temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 6:19), but for self-harmers these verses can be difficult to read, or hear quoted to them. We can perhaps help more by reminding sufferers that the Bible says God's love isn't conditional upon who we are and what we do (Romans 5:8). God doesn't ask us to be perfect - he frequently uses people with different struggles and 'limps' to achieve his purposes. Just think of the list of flawed heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11! Self-harm might be one part of who we are, but it's our faith in God that defines us.



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Remember that self-harm is an outlet for powerful negative emotions that can be difficult to express in other ways. The Psalms are full of the outpourings of people experiencing similar things. Sharing some of these with someone who is suffering can help them realise that they're not alone - and that God does not abandon us, even when we don't get everything right.

### ⇒ Helpful links

If you're struggling with self-harm, check out this organisation for help, including on-line support:

⇒ [www.selfharm.co.uk](http://www.selfharm.co.uk)

If you want to understand more about self-harm, get hold of: *Self-Harm: the Path to Recovery*, by Dr Kate Middleton. This book covers what self-harm is and why people do it, as well as giving great practical advice about recovery.

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/self-harm-book>

'Why do I harm myself?' is a seminar looking at what self-harm is: definition, causes, consequences and approaches to change:

⇒ <https://tinyurl.com/why-do-i-harm-myself-mp3>