

Understanding Self-Harm

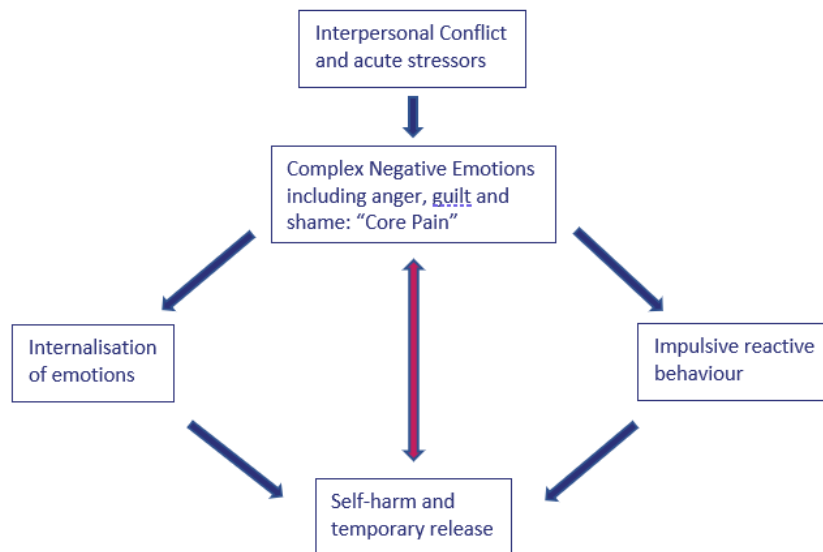
What is self-harm?

Self-harm involves intentionally causing injury to oneself, often as a response to psychological distress triggered by an acute stressor or interpersonal conflict. It can take many forms, including cutting, burning, headbanging, or self-poisoning.

Why does a child self-harm?

For most young people, self-harm is a response to intense emotions — extreme anger or sadness — that feel overwhelming. The physical act can provide temporary relief from those feelings when no other way of managing them is available.

Self-harm is a complex behaviour that emerges when a child cannot regulate their emotions in other ways. The pattern is often cyclical — negative thoughts and behaviours can reinforce each other — but with the right support, the cycle can be broken.



How common is self-harm?

Rates of self-harm in children and adolescents have increased significantly in recent years. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that non-suicidal self-harm has risen across the whole population over the past two decades. Some studies suggest that rates among younger children may have doubled between 2013 and 2020.

When to seek specialist help

Self-harm can follow a fixed pattern but can also escalate over time. Early intervention is important — both to prevent the behaviour becoming more severe and to address any underlying difficulties the child may be experiencing.

The first point of contact is the GP, school SENCO, or school nurse. If there are immediate concerns about a child's safety, they should attend the emergency department, where they can receive a specialist assessment from the CAMHS team.

Treatment options

The core aim of treatment is to help a child regulate their emotions in healthier ways. This may include psychoeducation, talking therapy, identifying unhelpful thought patterns or stressors, and — where an underlying mental health condition is present — medication or other psychological interventions.

Practical strategies to help in the moment

The following strategies can help a child manage the urge to self-harm when it arises:

- **Distraction:** activities the child enjoys — painting, drawing, a bath, or a favourite film.
- **Exercise:** a walk outside or a sports activity.
- **Talk to someone:** a trusted teacher or parent. Even if they don't want to talk, simply being with someone can help.
- **Write in a journal:** some children find it easier to express difficult feelings in writing than in conversation.
- **Controlled breathing:** slow, focused breathing in a calm environment can help reduce the intensity of overwhelming emotions.
- **Physical release:** squeezing a stress ball or hitting a pillow.