



# Self-harm

## A ChildLine Information Sheet

# Self-harm

*'I can't stop cutting myself. I don't feel alive any more. People pick on me and nobody talks to me – I feel like I'm invisible.'*  
Linzi, 15

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when people set out to harm themselves deliberately, sometimes in a hidden way. Self-harm can include cutting, burning, bruising or poisoning, but does not usually mean that someone wants to commit suicide. But, if people are not helped to stop self-harming, there is a risk that their urge to hurt themselves could grow into a stronger wish to end their lives.

The number of children talking to ChildLine's counsellors about self-harm has grown steadily over the last ten years. Over 60 per cent of the young people who call us about self-harm are aged between 12 and 15, and twelve times as many girls call about self-harming as boys.

Cutting is the most common form of self-harm that ChildLine hears about, but callers also talk about harming their bodies in other ways, such as deliberately bruising themselves, banging their heads against walls, pulling out their hair, burning themselves, falling over, or breaking an arm or leg.

### How does ChildLine help?

ChildLine's counsellors know that there is a difference between self-harming and wanting to commit suicide. But, when some young people call to talk about self-harm, they may need immediate medical attention. The counsellors listen carefully to each caller's situation at that moment and decide if medical help is needed.

Young people who call feel that it is important that ChildLine is confidential. They know that ChildLine is a safe place for them to talk about their

feelings – they will not be judged, blamed or criticised.

Although callers to ChildLine need help, they do not want people to know that they self-harm or to be forced to tell their family before they are ready. For some, the ChildLine counsellor is the first person they tell about their self-harm, but many others have already told someone before.

ChildLine counsellors talk to young people about how and when they hurt themselves, to try to find out how they feel before, during and after. This may help to find out why they are self-harming or what starts it off, such as bullying, abuse or family tensions. ChildLine helps callers to find ways to stop self-harming – ways that they themselves are able to follow, or else they continue to find it difficult to stop hurting themselves.

ChildLine also suggests that callers ring again the next time they feel like self-harming. Unlike many other services, ChildLine is easy to reach and offers comfort, advice and protection 24 hours a day.

### Why do children and young people self-harm?

*'I cut myself when I'm angry. It hurts but it helps my anger.'* Lisa, 11

Young people who speak to ChildLine about self-harm talk about their anger and frustration at things that are going on in their lives and the strong emotions that they need to release.

Callers tell ChildLine that the self-harm removes the other pain they feel, and they feel exhilarated while it is happening. But some say they feel



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guilty afterwards. This guilt may stop some young people from seeking help, or from telling a parent or carer, because they do not want anyone to think they were trying to commit suicide.

Lily said she had been cutting her arms and legs for about five months:

*'It feels good when I'm doing it, but then it hurts.'*

Lily cut herself two to three times a week whenever something happened. She told the school nurse and saw a counsellor once, but then had trouble setting up another appointment.

Often the self-harm seems to have started because of a crisis or ongoing difficulty in young callers' lives, such as sexual abuse (either ongoing or in the past), divorce, going into care, or the death of someone close.

Chrissie's parents were arguing all the time and making her so anxious she kept cutting her arms and legs:

*'I don't think they love me. They argue all the time and my dad sometimes hits out at me.'*

Emma, aged 14, asked ChildLine to help her stop cutting herself and beating herself up. Her best friend had died in a car crash a year ago, and now she was worried about exams in school.

In particular, many of the young people tell counsellors that their self-harm is linked to sexual abuse they have suffered. These tend to be older teenagers, who talk about being depressed and hating themselves and their bodies because of what happened to them. A number of these callers talk about having flashbacks to the abuse, and the cutting takes away these memories.

Shell, aged 14, said:

*'I cut myself when I feel sad, upset and alone.'*

A 15-year-old girl called because her brother had been sexually abusing her for 18 months and she knew it was

not right. She said she self-harms to punish herself.

As with other problems, such as eating disorders, depression, and substance abuse, young people who call ChildLine for help with self-harm mainly talk about a loss of control over their lives. By inflicting injury and pain on their bodies, these callers seem to regain a sense of control and personal ownership of their lives.

### Who should I tell about self-harming?

*'I told my teacher, but still couldn't stop doing it.'* Macie, 14

Children and young people calling about self-harm often say it is hard to stop and want to understand why they do this to themselves. Before contacting ChildLine, nearly half the callers had already told someone (such as a friend, parent, teacher, counsellor or doctor) about the problem.

But many young people do not want to tell anyone, either because they are worried about the shame, or because people will think they are mad or cannot be cured.

Young people calling about self-harm are more likely to speak to their friends than anyone else. Friends are supportive, do not judge and care deeply if someone they like is in trouble.

Thousands of young people call ChildLine every year because they are worried about someone they know. Because of this, ChildLine set up ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS), which encourages schoolchildren to help and support each other. This support is good for dealing with problems related to school, such as bullying or exam stress, both of which are reasons given for self-harm by young people.

If you self-harm, you are not alone. Many young people cut, bruise or hurt themselves to cope with stressful and difficult feelings or circumstances.

Between 2002 and 2003 ChildLine heard from over 3,000 children and young people who said they were self-



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harming or had harmed themselves in the past.

## How can I stop self-harming?

One 13-year-old girl told ChildLine that she uses breathing as a way to stop cutting herself:

*'I used to cut myself, but now I try to breathe instead to calm down.'*

Although it may not be possible to make the causes of self-harm disappear, there are other ways to express strong emotions and to relieve the pain, such as:

- writing down negative feelings on a piece of paper and ripping it up
- keeping a journal or diary of feelings
- doing something physical like running or skating, or making a lot of noise
- calling up a friend and talking, but not necessarily about self-harm

ChildLine offers children and young people calling about self-harm the chance to talk in confidence about what is happening in their lives. ChildLine is free and available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. ChildLine counsellors do not blame or criticise callers, but help them to work out how they can stop their self-harming and suggest where they can go for further support or advice.



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## Further information and advice

### NHS Direct

Tel: 0845 4647

Website: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

### National Self-Harm Network

PO Box 7246, Nottingham NG1 6WJ

Email: [info@nshn.co.uk](mailto:info@nshn.co.uk)

Website: [www.nshn.co.uk](http://www.nshn.co.uk)

### Self Harm Alliance (SHA)

PO Box 61, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

GL51 8YB

Tel: 01242 578820

Email: [selfharmalliance@aol.com](mailto:selfharmalliance@aol.com)

Website: [www.selfharmalliance.org](http://www.selfharmalliance.org)

### YoungMinds

Tel: 020 7336 8445

Parents Information Service:

0800 018 2138

Website:

[www.youngminds.org.uk/selfharm](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/selfharm)

To order more copies of this information sheet or for general enquiries please call 020 7650 3200.

ChildLine is a registered charity, no. 1003758

**Please note** – all names and identifying details have been changed to protect callers' identities.

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## CONTACTING CHILDLINE

Children can call ChildLine on **0800 1111** (all calls are free of charge, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year).

Or write to us at ChildLine, Freepost NATN1111, London E1 6BR; or visit [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Children who are deaf or find using a regular phone difficult can try our textphone service on **0800 400 222**.

Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm

Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

We have a special helpline for children and young people living away from home in places such as refuges, boarding schools and young offenders' institutions called The Line on **0800 88 4444**.

Monday to Friday 9.30am to 9.30pm

Saturday to Sunday 9.30am to 8.00pm

ChildLine in Partnership with Schools (CHIPS) helps schools set up schemes to encourage children and young people to support each other. For more information call **020 7650 3230**.