

Self-harm – what to say and what not to say

Self-harm is significantly prevalent amongst teenagers – but that doesn't make it any less shocking when we find out that a child we care about is hurting themselves. People are often worried to say anything, fearful that the wrong approach may make things worse, so here are a few pointers on what not to say as well as some advice about how to have a more positive conversation. This advice is all based on suggestions from young people.

Don't judge me

I already feel guilty and ashamed. Don't make it worse

Many young people don't open up about their self-harming behaviours because they are worried that they'll be judged as crazy or attention seeking. This fear of judgement can act as a huge barrier to help-seeking and problem sharing and a judgemental attitude will almost certainly result in the conversation being cut short if a young person was trying to open up to you.

Instead, try to be open and honest in your approach – it's okay to tell a child that you don't really understand and to give them the opportunity to explain a little, but it's not okay to make assumptions or judgments about their motivations or behaviours.

Don't tell me to stop

I would stop if I could but I can't – and now I feel even more guilty

Stopping the cycle of self-harm usually takes some time and can only happen once a young person has learnt to manage their thoughts and feelings in a different way. Asking them to stop simply sets them up to fail and often results in them either choosing not to talk to us about their issues in the future. It can also lead to them stopping one behaviour but taking up a new one (e.g. drinking instead of cutting) or trying very hard not to harm themselves and then doing so more severely once they finally do give in as their feelings are more pent up than usual.

Instead of asking the young person to stop outright, offer your help in finding the support and strategies they need in order to develop healthier means of coping.

Don't go over the top

I am not trying to kill myself. I do not want to die, please stop with the drama

Whilst finding out a young person has been harming themselves is very distressing, the most helpful thing you can do is to stay as calm as possible and to listen. Whilst being angry, frustrated or upset are perfectly understandable responses, they are likely to make the young person feel guilty and afraid rather than listened to and supported.

Instead, try as hard as you can to remain calm. This can take your very best acting skills. Focusing on your breathing, or trying to respond as you would if their injury were an accident, can help you to respond in a more calm and quiet manner. Remember, this is about them, not about you.

Don't dismiss it

I'm not being melodramatic and I won't just get over it. I need your help

If you learn that a young person is self-harming, you should be prepared to listen to and support them. Many people assume a young person is simply over-reacting to day-to-day pressures, or assume that less severe self-harm indicates that the underlying issues are minor also. Responding in this way will leave the young person reluctant to seek your help again in the future and can sometimes lead to more extreme behaviours if they perceive this is what is needed to convey their need more effectively.

Instead, encourage the young person to open up by asking open questions and giving them plenty of time and space to share their thoughts and feelings. Don't assume that you know what the underlying issues or the solutions are. Approach the conversation with an open mind, ready to explore the issue together.

Don't pretend to understand

I don't understand it so how can you?

It's okay to admit to the young person that you don't understand exactly what they're thinking or feeling, or why harming themselves seems like an appropriate way of managing those feelings.

Instead, be prepared to listen. Let the young person tell their own story and explore their thoughts and feelings. Over time, you may both come to understand it better but it's likely to be a gradual process.

Don't ask me why

My mum just wanted an answer that explained what I was doing, but my head was a mess and it just wasn't that simple

There are many different reasons that people harm themselves, but at the point at which you first learn about a young person's self-harming they may not have enough understanding or insight into their own issues to be able to explain why they're doing it. Understanding this will often come with time and listening – sometimes with the support of a therapist. Sometimes the reasons never become especially clear or there are a range of overlapping reasons.

Instead of first asking the young person why they are self-harming, ask them what you can do to support them and let them drive the conversation insofar as they are able.

If you're reading this and you're worried that you've got it already got it wrong, don't panic. Instead, revisit the situation as quickly as possible and apologise to the young person about your initial response and explain that you were very emotional and ask them if they will let you try again. We all make mistakes – it's how we respond to them really matters.