

Introduction to self-harm

The NHS defines self-harm as 'when somebody intentionally damages or injures their body' but it is important to note that self-harm can mean different things to different people. Self-harming can take many forms and can be very complex in nature. Sadly, research suggests that self-harm is common amongst the autistic population.

Some examples of self-harm include:

- Cutting, burning, biting.
- Substance abuse
- Head banging and hitting.
- Taking personal risks.
- Picking and scratching.
- Neglecting oneself
- Pulling out hair.

There can be many reasons or causes as to why someone self-harms. Sometimes it can be extremely difficult to work out what the reason is and can cause a great deal of emotional distress for all family members.

Some possible reasons include:

- Using it as coping strategy.
- Seek a feeling of pain.
- To obtain a release.
- Impulsivity
- Feelings of social isolation.
- Low self-esteem.
- Poor self-image.
- Feeling out of control.
- Trauma
- A way to communicate.
- Sensory overload
- Distraction from overwhelming environment and situations.
- Unmet needs
- Burnout



Ideas to consider

First of all, it is important to note that professional advice and support should be sought from the relevant services. The ideas that follow are just to get you thinking about some considerations:

- Start off by identifying the function of or reason for the self-harming. Once you know this you can then decide the best way to support the individual. To help you do this it may be useful to keep a diary outlining the who, what, where, when and how of incidents. Pay attention to things that happen around the incident. For example, weather changes, watching an emotional programme or sibling argument.
- Don't use punishment, this can add extra difficulties into an already complex situation. Remember that the person is probably doing the best they can.
- Give the person opportunities to explore and understand their feelings, taking into account that some autistic people may find this incredibly difficult. You may want to try other mediums such as art, drama, or music.
- Help the person find coping strategies that work for them. Remember that these may not be your preferred methods, but if they work for the person and they are safe that's all that matters.
- Encourage open communication and if possible, create opportunities for worries or concerns to be shared, as well as the reasons for self-harming. Consider their preferred communication method. Get creative with communication like trying a worry jar, journal, or video diary.

