

# Self-harm – techniques for helping young people to cope

When a young person feels the urge to self-harm, it's not easy for them to think of anything else. **Dr Pooky Knightsmith** suggests some practical strategies to help them rechannel their emotions

When a young person is overcome by an urge or need to self-harm, it can be very helpful for them to have a range of different strategies they can tap into to try and cope with the way they are feeling at that moment without actually inflicting harm on themselves.

At <http://bit.ly/PookyK> you can download 130 ideas that a young person could use as an alternative to self-harm, either as a slideshow or as a printable resource. All of these ideas were suggested by former self-harmers, and a sample of them is presented in the box, right.

Different things work for different people at different times; there are a wide range of ideas here to try. It's always worth having follow-up conversations with the young person you're working with to find out what's worked and what hasn't so they can refine their list and determine the best strategies to employ at the moment they're overcome with the need to harm.

I often get young people to write out a card they can carry around. On that card, they write, 'When I get the urge to self-harm, I will...' followed by a list of five actions. We start with the least intrusive, the sort of thing they could do in the middle of a maths lesson, and end up with the 'nuclear option' – that might be going to talk to you in your office, for example.

I get them to carry it around because when you feel that urge to self-harm, you can't think about anything else; you can't think of the strategies you talked about with your teacher last week, you just need to be told them, and the card does that.

## UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING SELF-HARM: AN OPTIMUS WEBINAR

Watch Dr Pooky Knightsmith's webinar to find out:

- what self-harm is and the types we might encounter
- why people turn to self-harm
- triggers and warning signs
- how to respond to and support pupils who self-harm.

Go to: <http://bit.ly/PookyK>

### Ideas that simulate self-harm

These are ideas that give some of the visual or physical sensations of self-harm without actually causing harm to the body.

- Ping an elastic band or hair band on your wrist (but not too hard).
- Draw red lines on your skin.
- Clench an ice cube in your hand.
- Write on your skin.
- Finger paint using red paint.
- On a photo or drawing of yourself, mark in red where you want to hurt yourself.
- Plunge your face into a sink full of freezing cold water for a few seconds.

### Ideas for when you need to vent your feelings

Sometimes our feelings become too much for us to bear and the only way we can think of managing them is to hurt ourselves. Here are some alternatives that will help you vent anger, rage or other extreme feelings.

- Go somewhere quiet and scream.
- Punch a punch bag.
- Make a ball out of play dough and smash it.
- Hurl lumps of ice at the ground and watch them smash.
- Smash a watermelon.
- Hammer nails into wood.
- Play squash.
- Tear up a magazine.
- Write down what made you feel angry and scribble it out until the paper is worn through.
- Dance like nobody is watching.
- Play music loudly.
- Bang drums or other percussion instruments.
- Run up hill.
- Write a letter to the person who has made you angry, venting your frustration (but don't send it).
- Cry.
- Cut up an old piece of material.
- Tear up cardboard.
- Have a pillow fight with a wall.
- Stamp your feet.
- Snap sticks in half.
- Sing very loudly.

### Ideas for when you feel alone or down

These are ideas which will help when you feel alone or deeply sad and you don't know why.

- Look at photographs of your friends and family.
- Think of your favourite day ever.
- Tell someone about your favourite day ever.
- Talk to someone you trust.
- Call a helpline or use an online forum.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Take a walk in the garden, notice each tree and flower and try to learn their names.
- Walk your dog.
- Go to the park and swing, listen to the laughter of children and let it infect you.
- Re-read your favourite childhood book.
- Watch silly videos of cats on YouTube.
- Listen to a 'feel good' playlist of songs to lift your mood.