

Self-Harm

Making Sense of It



Information for whānau supporting a
young person who is harming themselves



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NEW ZEALAND

This resource has been co-created with
whānau who have a young person in their
lives who has, or is experiencing self-harm



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How do parents/whānau feel?

Common feelings parents/whānau have when they find out their young person is self-harming

Parents and whānau members have a whole range of feelings when they are supporting their young person who is struggling with self-harm. The most common ones are:

Caring

“I gave her a hug, told her we loved her and that we would figure it out together” ”

Anger

“Outwardly the first few times I flipped out, I had no idea what was happening or why. I told her off, got angry. Internally I felt huge distress for my child, to be suffering so much” ”

Shame

“It made me feel low, like I had somehow failed as a parent. I think I said to my daughter she should stop that because people will judge her and that will make life hard for her” ”

Sadness

“My baby is hurting themselves” ”

Exhausted

"I was so busy.... I was commuting 45 minutes to work doing a 40 hour week and 45 minutes back, taking the kids with me as well there's been a lot of sleepless nights where I've just sat and kind of Googled random stuff"

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Guilty

"I felt helpless and guilty that this had happened, like I hadn't been enough support to stop it"

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Shock

"I've just never been exposed to anybody who harmed themselves before, so I was just naïve you know and it's not something that you talk about in every day conversation"

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Overwhelmed

"I was like this is so over my head like I don't even know what to do and it escalated so quickly"

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Anxious

"I felt very much out of my depth and not validated or scared, fearful you know at first, I can imagine other parents feel that way too, it's your kids you're dealing with you know"

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What is self-harm?

Self-harm includes a range of behaviours a young person might do to hurt or harm themselves.

Young people self-harm for lots of different reasons including to show how desperate they are feeling, to get away from terrible feelings, to stop feeling numb, to escape a terrible situation, to get help or to die. Young people may gravitate towards others who also self-harm. Sometimes self-harm is dismissed as ‘attention seeking’ but is better thought of as an attempt to get, or make connections. The reasons for self-harm can change and more than one thing can be going on at the same time.

“What would help me the most I suppose is understanding why? You know like why did you get to that point you know what was it, what was happening inside?”

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“It’s that disconnect with identity and purpose that was contributing mostly to the physical expression. Internally they felt for who I am? I don’t even know who I am. I feel so disconnected with who I am”

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Your young person’s struggles with self-harm might ebb and flow over time, they may have periods of self-harm, stop and perhaps start again. They may harm themselves for a short time and then never again. Most young people don’t harm themselves when they are adults.

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The relationship between self-harm and suicide

Listen to your instinct as a parent, self-harm lets you know that something is not working for your young person. The relationship between self-harm and suicide is not clearly understood, but we do know that all young people who self-harm need connection and support.

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How common is self-harm?

Self-harm can be taken as a signal that all is not well in your young person's life. Self-harm is relatively common and worryingly around 1 in 4 young people reporting self-harm each year in Aotearoa New Zealand. Just because something is relatively common, it doesn't mean you can't feel distressed or upset about it.

“I was kind of like okay so it's not normal but it's not uncommon and I suppose that was a little bit reassuring.”

“In some ways I found it helpful to know what self-harm was common, however I also found this unhelpful. When it is constantly mentioned it makes you feel like people are minimising the situation for your child. Even though I still worried about suicide it was helpful to be told that not all children who self-harm have suicidal thoughts.”

Some young people need to go to hospital after they have self-harmed, but most don't. Of those who do, 3 out of 4 don't go back to hospital in the following year with self-harm. Most young people who have self-harmed go on to thrive, and live fulfilling lives.

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Communication and Hope

Young people struggling with self-harm want help from their whānau and people they know and trust. It can be tough as a parent, but they need hope and communication from you.

“Especially for young people like all they want to do is feel validated and heard and understood you know, even if it makes no sense whatsoever to us because we’re not experiencing that experience”

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“You are a mother. No-one can take that away from you. You will know your child better than anyone ever will. It’s almost like a colonised perspective that it is only the outside that can help. And this kind of disempowering of whānau, like the power of ... whānau to be together and that’s where those conversations would happen. I think those conversations can happen and I think they are most powerful when they come from your grandfather, you know, or your uncle or your cousin”

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Self-harm is a challenge for the whole family/whānau

Self-harm is a challenge for your whole family, not just the young person who is struggling. Parents need help from people they trust, so they can best help their young person. Parents often feel ashamed, that their young person self-harming is a parenting 'fail' which can make asking for help hard.

“Life as I knew it changed INSTANTLY when I discovered my daughter self-harming - I could barely continue to work, or parent my other children, or manage basic household tasks, because I was so concerned for her safety, constantly watching her and being aware of her moods, and also just so emotionally devastated and drained. I felt like I had a toddler in the house again, and was never off duty, or could never relax. On top of this, I didn't know how to talk to others about it, and although I wanted to/needed to talk, it was such a private sensitive topic that it was very hard to know who to trust with this.”

“I know we really struggled asking for help even though our family was all there like ready and waiting, we struggled asking for help because we were like we should be able to manage and things seemed like they were okay at the time.”

“She needed my support. But I was unable to support her because I myself so desperately needed support. The doctor didn't seem to take into consideration that we needed more than just getting counselling for our teenager. I was far too exhausted and embarrassed of my own situation to ask for help.”

Siblings may have lots of big questions for you which are best answered honestly, without information overload depending on their age. Siblings need space and time to have a life which is not defined by the self-harm of another young person in their home. Tuakana teina is the idea that siblings support or awhi each other. You may have more than one young person in your whānau who is self-harming. You have learnt many things about what works, or does not work for your whānau.

“I need to sleep to keep myself sane because I look at what happened with my young person’s self-harm, but I was getting up every hour to check on the older child make sure she was okay and I was actually just incapable of even functioning. Looking back we stopped eating properly because nobody could be bothered cooking dinner, we were just getting takeaways all the time, like we were just exhausted. I wanted to keep them safe.”

Work is really important to lots of parents so they can provide for their family, and they may also enjoy it. It can feel hard to support your young person and also work, look for work or study. It can feel like you are being really squeezed.

“We’re just really busy, you know parents are so under the pump I remember driving home from work one day thinking you know I really felt like I needed to quit work so that I could just be home and look after her. I was like would that be unfair to the other kids. We wouldn’t be able to eat or have clothes and I was like would that make it worse for my child living in poverty?”

Self-harm by your young person might be an opportunity to connect, or reconnect with your young person.

“The most helpful is just family that recognised enough to kind of sit with it or have a conversation about it, or at least talk to me about it even if they don’t feel comfortable talking to their young person.”

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Self-harm might bring up things from your past

Self-harm by your young person might bring up experiences or memories of really tough things from the past. Some parents have had, or may be having their own experiences of self-harm. This can help with understanding what is going on for your young person but it is also true that your child might be experiencing quite different circumstances, your child is not you. Some young people struggling with self-harm have experienced abuse and trauma, or loss including by members who have died by suicide. What is happening in your family doesn't need to define your family.

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How to make a complicated system work for you

Many parents tell us they found it a bit complicated to understand how they could get professional help for their young person. There are lots of great people working to support young people. **Some practical tips are:**

- ⑥ Form a relationship with someone you trust, who can help you advocate for your young person and whānau. You can be the advocate, but this can also be hard when you just want to be a parent.
- ⑥ Don't do this journey alone – make sure you have support from someone else in the family, or a person you trust when going to appointments or making phone calls. At a basic level you can make sure that appointment times you are offered suit your family timetable.

“I was lucky as a good friend works in mental health and was able to guide me through the maze of getting advice, and answered lots of my questions. Without her I would have been 100% lost as no one in my family circle or friends had any idea what to do.”

“The most helpful was having therapy for her and I together as a whānau which is really important because there again you've got both perspectives, you've got full context and we could work together on stuff that she wanted and I wanted to work on.”

Many parents and whānau would like to be more involved in supporting their young person and don't want to be left out of care. Decide as a family who you want to talk to and what information they need to best help your young person.

“I really struggled to get my daughter to counselling as it was during my working hours. I had to organise others to pick her up and drop her off and more than one time I forgot.”

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Staying in education/training/recreational interests

Young people need meaning and activity in their lives, which may mean school, training or work. In general, it is better for young people struggling with self-harm to be doing something with their time, rather than nothing. You may need to advocate with school staff and come up with a shared agreement about how best to support your young person.

“It was unhelpful at school that my child was being forced to keep her school jacket on (even) on a hot day so not to let it (self-harm) be seen”

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Medicine

Medications may be one strategy in a toolkit when a young person is struggling with self-harm but it needs to be part of multi-pronged approach and may take time. Medications may work for some young people, and not for others. Support and help will be from whānau in the meantime and needs to continue alongside any medication.

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Developmental challenges

Some young people struggle with self-harm alongside other big challenges such as being depressed, anxious being neurodiverse or questioning their gender identity.

Where possible, getting your young person effective supports for those challenges can have a positive impact on their need to self-harm.

“My daughter (who has self-harmed) is anorexic and not receiving the treatment she needs because she is too ‘complex’ which actually just means she has ADHD and autism also”

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Social media

Young people use social media to seek connection – some content is helpful and increases their sense of connection with peers and the big world. Other content may be unhelpful. A whole of family approach to digital use is the best approach with active discussions about time spent on devices, who pays for data and where the devices are when it is time to sleep.

“It is hard work. She has restrictions on her phone and I’ve talked about you know it’s to keep you safe so that you don’t see things that you shouldn’t on the internet and she’s limited on the amount of time she can go on Tik Tok and Snapchat and it’s those types of things she doesn’t really use them, because they’re not great Apps and they’re just being exposed to so much bad stuff.”

Communication of caring

Young people can harm themselves in lots of different ways. Reducing access to some methods of self-harm are important, for example making sure that medications, including those you can buy from the supermarket and those used by older members in your household, are hard to get because it increases the amount of time between the desire to self-harm and the action. It also increases the chances for help.

Separating ammunition from safely stored guns is sensible if you have a gun in your home or workplace. Moving the keys for a safe is also an option if the young person knows where they are.

Going through bags, bedrooms and kitchens to get rid of everything a young person could cut themselves with often creates lots of tension, and it is very hard to get rid of everything and this approach often creates conflict. You could say “I’m worried about your, self-harm, how can we work together to manage this” and think about how you would feel if someone went through your handbag, or bedside table or back pack.

Young people also use a lot of different items if they feel the urge to hang themselves. Follow your instinct as a parent about how much supervision your young person needs – this need may ebb and flow and works best when you are able to have a conversation with them “I’m worried about you, how can I help you because I’m scared that you will hurt yourself.”

It is most important to create an environment for your young person which includes ways to connect, ways to have a conversation and keeping connection with them whether or not they are harming themselves. Ignoring or punishing self-harm tends to make young people feel even more disconnected.

If your young person is cutting themselves you may find it helpful for them to take care of the cuts or wounds themselves. **Options can include:**

- ④ Apply pressure if the cut is bleeding
- ④ Clean the cut or wound under the tap and dress with plasters or bandages
- ④ If the area becomes red or swollen they need medical attention.

Who can you ask for help or support or advice

Get help from people you trust, so they can help you help your young person.

- Whānau or family
- Friends
- Telehealth like Healthline and the National Poisons Centre
- In person help from your GP, School Guidance Counsellor or Social Worker in Schools.

In an
emergency
call

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“My husband and I went to see our GP and told her what had been happening. We also told close family members and a few close friends.”

“The school counsellor was amazing. They were very clear what they would do next - check in on our daughter in a few days and make sure she knew they were available if she needed to talk or felt like she wanted to hurt herself during the school day”

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