



What is self-harm?

Self-harm is an outward sign of inner turmoil. It is used as a coping strategy, by substituting physical pain for emotional pain. Whilst it can be difficult to understand, both for the person engaged in self injury and for those around them, it is an attempt to access a feeling of control, power, and emotional management.

How should I respond?

Whilst your best intentions may lead you to want to tell them to stop, this can often increase the desire to self-harm - avoid subjecting the person to excessive control from others. Work with them to know that they have options - sometimes they may choose to self-harm, but sometimes they may choose a different coping strategy.

- Be respectful - communicate your respect for this attempt at survival and emotional management, even though it involves injuring themselves, and your hope that this will be able to find alternatives and consider different options.
- Be brave - talk about it. Self injury can often be accompanied by shame and confusion and getting this issue out into the open allows the person to know that they have people around them who can tolerate their pain. Avoid shock and fear, and do what you can to educate yourself.

**Avoid judgment, dismissal, shock or punishment for this behaviour;
it will only increase the person's feeling of isolation.**

What helps?

Attitude is everything. Be open, accepting and understanding - listen to them. Show that you care. Work with them to consider safety and hygiene, and crisis support that they can access in the really bad times.

Say thank you - if they have told you about this behaviour, they have trusted you with the challenging circumstances in which they find themselves.

Be honest - if the person who is self injuring is a minor, you might have a safeguarding responsibility to share this. It's best to be honest about what your limitations are, and why. At the same time, you can communicate your desire to want to support them through this distressing challenge.

Work collaboratively - it's not your job to fix or change things for the person, but you can be supportive in them doing this for themselves. Take their lead to see what would help - might it be finding counselling, art therapy, or a different support?

Explore some helpful short term alternatives together - there are lots of resources online for lists of alternative coping strategies - why not search them out together?

To read more on self-harm visit [fegans.org.uk](https://www.fegans.org.uk)