



Supporting young people who self-harm

**With thanks to
Kielly Alfoadari & Dr Pooky Knightsmith**



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Psychological Perspectives in Education & Primary Care

A programme of training designed to help staff in education and primary care to:

- recognise and understand mental health difficulties presenting in childhood/adolescence
- better support these children, young people, and their families

Modules include:

- Recognising common mental health difficulties
- Communicating with distressed young people
- Supporting young people who **self harm**
- Supporting young people with **depression and low mood**
- Supporting young people with **anxiety (in primary and secondary schools)**
- Supporting children and young people with **ASD**
- Supporting children and young people with **ADHD**
- Recognising **Eating Disorder difficulties** and supporting young people
- Supporting children and young people with **behavioural difficulties**


TAKE CARE



OF YOURSELF



What would **you** like
to get out of this
session?



What we want you to get out of the session

- To help you think about **what self-harm is** and **why young people may self-harm**
- To help you understand **what it feels like to be a young person who is self-harming**
- To understand **why your response to a YP matters** and what can be helpful and unhelpful when talking to a young person
- To help you **support young people who self-harm by thinking about alternative ways to cope**



Overview

- Understanding self-harm (including common misconceptions)
- Conversations with young people
- Offering practical support
- Anything else?




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Common misconceptions



Defining self-harm
(what could it look
like?)



Prevalence estimates

- One in eight (12.8%) 5-19 year olds have at least one emotional, behavioural or hyperactivity disorder.
- **Self-harm or attempted suicide (at any time) is much higher in those with a mental health disorder than those without**

NHS Digital (2018)



Prevalence estimates

- Around $\frac{1}{4}$ of all 11-16 year olds with a mental health disorder have self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point (compared to 3% of young people without a mental health disorder).
- This increases to nearly **half** of young people aged 17-19 with a mental health disorder
- Around half of all young women with a mental health disorder (52%) also reported having self-harmed or made a suicide attempt

Prevalence estimates

- Estimates will vary depending on how self-harm is measured
- Reports suggest around 12% of young people overall may self-harm (Doyle et al, 2015)
- **Rates have risen most sharply in young females** (e.g. an increase of 68% in 13-16 year old females from 2011-14 (Morgan et al, 2017))



LGBTQ+ young people and self-harm

- LGBTQ+ youth are up **to 4 times more likely to self-harm** than their heterosexual peers
- Depression symptoms are also more prevalent among those in sexual minorities (even in children as young as 10)
- Symptoms appear to worsen during adolescence and early adulthood



Ethnic minorities and self-harm

- Little systematic research (especially in young people) – although factors known to increase the risk of mental distress in adults (e.g. social exclusion) are more common in some ethnic groups and may increase the risk of self harm
- In adults, from BAME communities, self harm was often a response to interpersonal distress rather than a specific psychiatric illness
- Rates of self-harm appear to be higher in females, irrespective of ethnicity





Understanding self-harm



Cutting for me releases all the built-up anger and frustration and pain I feel inside. There are many things that happen to me in my life which cause the pain I feel and how I release it. Mostly the feelings of isolation like being outcast pretty much from relationships altogether. I don't feel like I am a very stable person and I hate myself a lot of the time. I think body image also has a lot to do with my cutting. School is stressful, home life I can't handle sometimes.'

Truth hurts (2006)



Self-harm can be:

Direct or indirect
and transient or
longer term.....

....but whatever
the 'type' it's
usually conducted
at times of anger,
distress, fear or
worry and is a way
of coping with
these feelings

Put simply,
self-harm is a
coping
mechanism

We're more
accepting of
other types...





What **individual** factors are associated with self harm?

- Depression/anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Poor problem-solving skills
- Hopelessness
- Impulsivity
- LGBTQ+
- Gender Dysphoria
- Learning Difficulties
- Neurodiversity
- Drug/alcohol abuse



What **family** factors are associated with self harm?

- Extreme expectations
- Abuse
- Conflict
- Mental health problems in parents
- Domestic violence
- Drug/alcohol abuse



What **social** factors are associated with self harm?

- Loneliness
- Difficulties with peer relationships
- Easy availability of drugs/alcohol



Watch the clip about young people talking about their experiences of self harm.

- What are some of the reasons given for self-harming?
- What circumstances and motivations are discussed?
- Does anything surprise you?
- What will you take from the clip?

Why do young people self-harm?

Emotional pain (sadness, grief, hopelessness, depression) 57%

Self-hatred (shame, guilt, dirtiness) 51%

Anger (frustration, powerlessness) 50%

Anxiety (fear, tension, panic) 34%

Neediness (unsupported, unheard) 30 %

Unreality (numbness, Empty) 9%

Common Motivations

Control

Punishment

Feel cared for

**Physical vs
emotional pain**

Appear ugly

Feel real



Self Harm, the autism spectrum and sensory processing

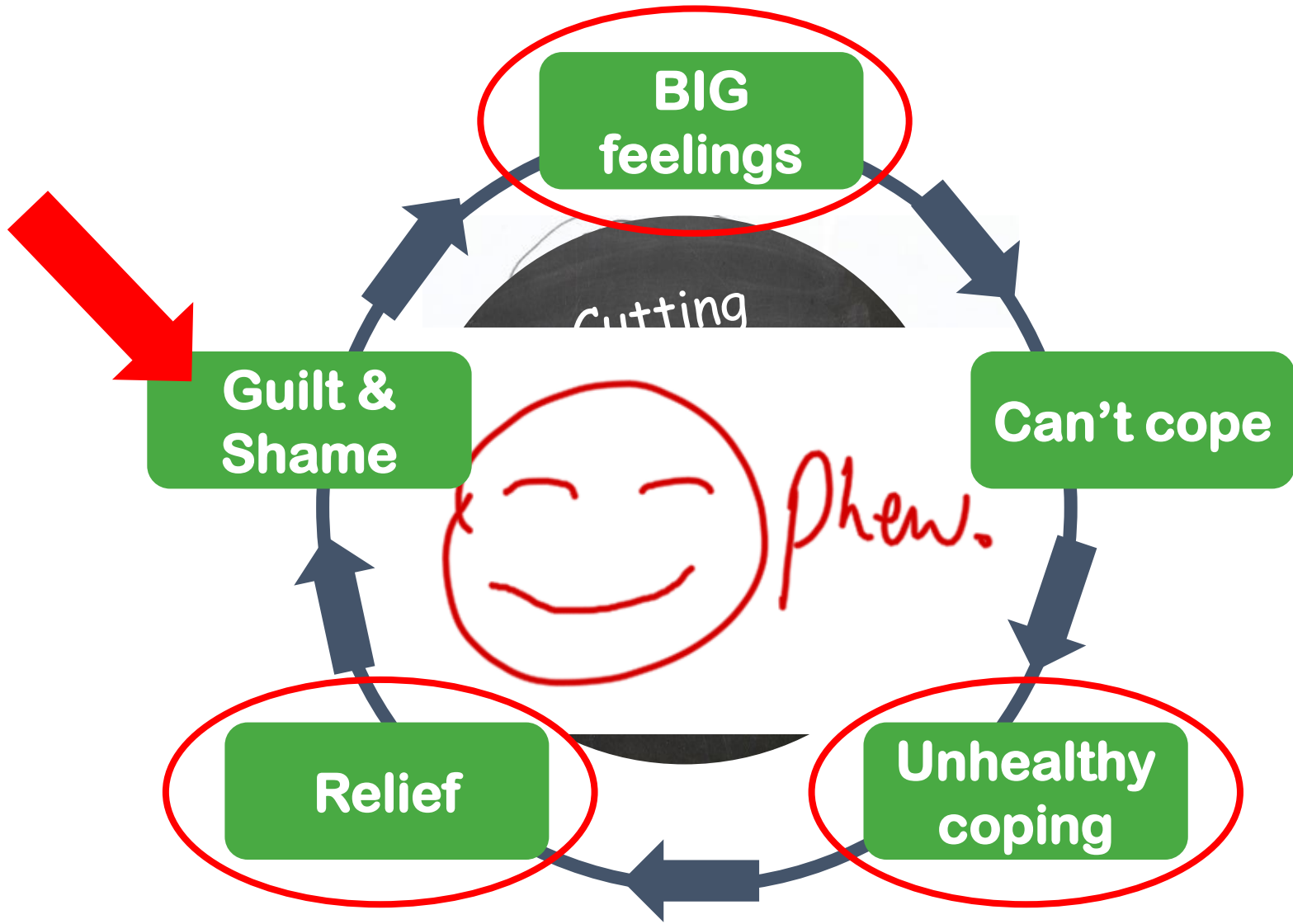
Triggers to self harm may be different (but not always) :

- Can be associated with coping with or counterbalancing overwhelming sensory information
- Associated with increasing distress (may be public, blatant and common methods include head banging, scratching, biting and hair pulling).



Common triggers

- Relationship difficulties (family & friends)
- Life events (divorce)
- Trauma (bereavement/abuse)
- Bullying
- Self harm in friends/the media
- Pressure (exams)





What warning
signs should
you look out
for?

Suicide or Self-Harm?

Some people who self-harm have a strong desire to kill themselves, but most will not

Even if the intent to die is low, self harm needs to be taken seriously – people who do not intend to kill themselves sometimes do so because they don't realise the seriousness of their injuries

INTENTION is our best guide

**Self-Harm
or
Suicide?**

**Lethality is NOT a
reliable guide**

Not always clear



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Seeking help

- This is usually really difficult for YP
- Seeking help is often the first step in breaking the cycle and sharing the experience **can** be a huge relief
- How others react influences whether the YP seeks **further** help
- YP need to **feel comfortable** with who they speak to

Young people rarely seek help either before or after an episode of self-harm.

- **What does this tell us?**
- **How can we respond in the most supportive way?**

You learn a young
person is
self-harming...
What next?

Four Helpful Responses:

1

LISTEN!

2

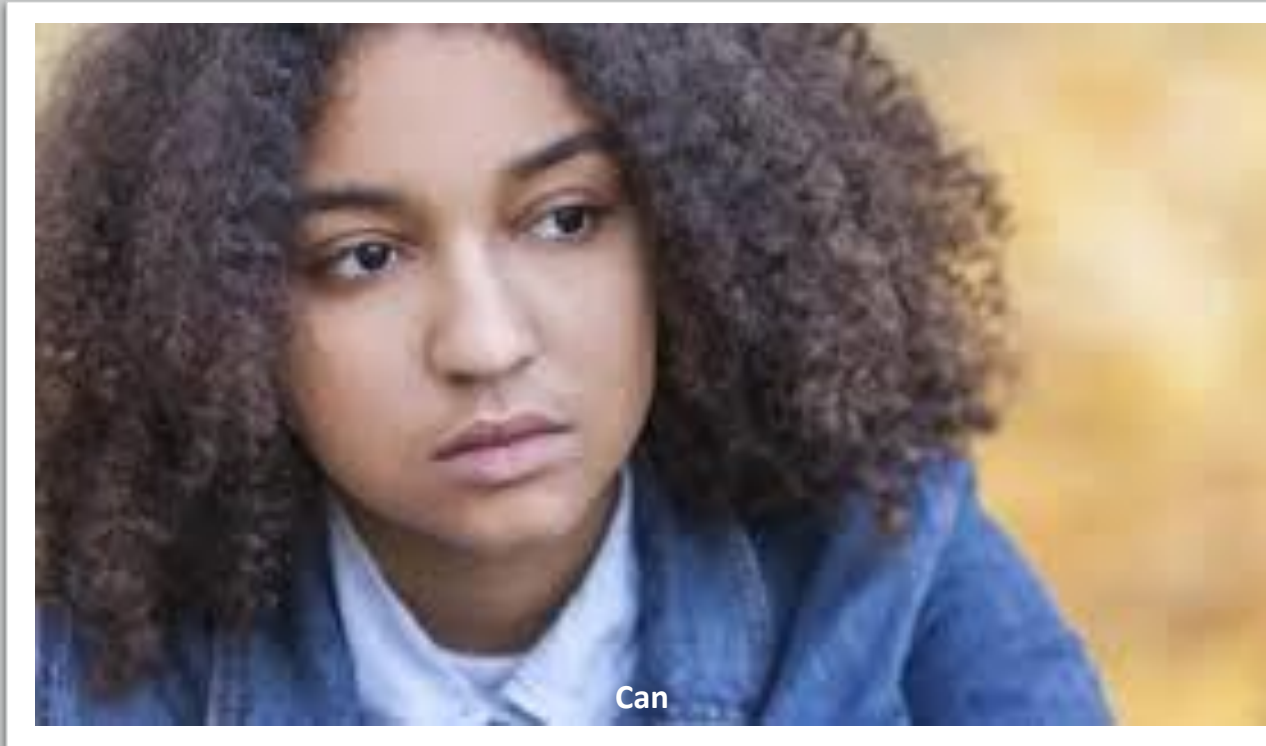
Manage your reactions

3

Offer practical support

4

Involve the student in decisions



What if the young person doesn't want to talk?

- **Who** is best placed to have the conversation?
- **How** can you help them to communicate?
 - Can you talk whilst doing something else?
 - Is talking the only option)?

Can you offer alternative sources of support?

Possible scenarios



Jade shows you fresh cuts on her arm.

They look clean and shallow and she has no visible signs of shock.



Seb is changing for PE and reveals a series of burns on his leg.

There are other young people nearby who may have noticed what's happening.

Anika comes to you crying and clearly very distressed.

She says she has taken a packet of paracetamol but she doesn't want to die.



Rohan has been unwell with a fever.

He shows you cuts on his arm, they look red, oozing & angry.



Questions to consider when responding

Is there an immediate need for medical care?

Is the young person a danger to themselves?

What message do you want to give to the young person?

Questions to consider when responding

Is there an immediate need for medical care?

First Aid first

A&E if needed

Wound
management

Questions to consider when responding

Is the young person a danger to themselves?

If you are concerned that an episode is a serious attempt to end their life,

and they are known to CAMHS:

Contact your local CAMHS Tier 3 Team Duty Line

If they are not known to CAMHS:

INSERT THE RELEVANT CONTACT DETAILS HERE

Questions to consider when responding

What message do you want to give the young person?

Listen



Remain calm

Ask how you
can help



Showing you're not
afraid to talk about the
specifics of self-harm
can feel very
supportive to the YP



Confidentiality & Safeguarding

Be aware of your safeguarding policy and any potential issues

When telling other people:

- Always check with young person beforehand if possible
- Work out together who you need to talk to – discuss the importance of letting parents know and address concerns they may have about this.
- Contact parents (unless there are reasons for not doing so - in this case, consult with local safeguarding lead).



Confidentiality & Safeguarding

- If a child or young person is known to CAMHS, contact the Lead Professional/Care Co-ordinator or local team's duty line
- Consider referral to other services

In a nutshell:

Is it in the young person's best interest to share this information?

Yes

**What? How?
Who with?**

No

**Why not? Could
you defend this
decision?**



Watch the clip about young people talking about their experience of support.

- What do the young people say you **should** do?
- What should you **not** do?
- What will you take from this?

**Thanking
the young
person for
sharing this
information**

**Showing that you
care about them
as a person**

**What can
be helpful**



**Discuss
confidentiality**

**Asking
how you
can help**

**Giving the
young person
permission to
talk about the
self harm**

**Staying
calm**

Agreeing to unrealistic plans

Seeing them as just a self-harmer

What can be unhelpful



Giving ultimatums or applying pressure

Telling them that self harm is wrong

Giving a negative reaction

Assuming that every episode of self harm is for the same reason

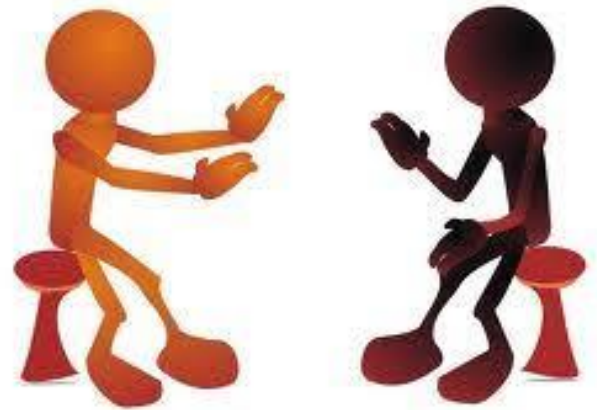
Practice Task:
Approaching a young
person who may be
self-harming

Scenario: Katie is friends with a student you know (Georgia). Katie has come to you very upset because she caught Georgia cutting herself in the toilets one afternoon. Georgia was very distraught and made Katie promise that she would keep it to herself. You are very concerned and are going to talk to Georgia.



Practice Task: Approaching a young person who may be self-harming

- In pairs, think about how you would approach the topic of self-harm.
 - What would you want to talk about?
 - What questions would you ask?
 - What should you be mindful of?
 - What should you **avoid** doing?



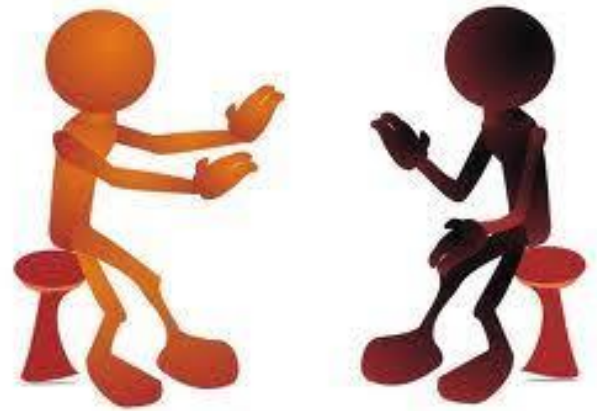
Practice Task:
Approaching a young
person who may be
self-harming

- **You will need to be in groups of 3 (or 4):**
 - One person will play the young person
 - One person will play the staff member who it has been agreed will approach the young person
 - One (two) person will act as an observer



Practice Task:
Approaching a young
person who may be
self-harming

You have up to 15 minutes in total. Try to spend a few minutes reading your brief 5-10 minutes on the role play and the remaining time to feedback within your group. (Observer should keep a note of timings)



- What went well
- What did you find difficult?
- What will you take from this exercise?





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**Explore
alternatives ways
of coping**

**Confide in
family and
close
friends**

**Identifying
other ways
of coping
with
difficult
feelings**

**Identifying a
young person's
safety net**



**Access to
appropriate
information
or helplines**

**Speak with
a favourite
teacher**

Help the young person to identify less risky ways to cope with difficult emotions



**Write or draw
about feelings**

**Talk to a person
or helpline**

**Go to a quiet
place and
scream /
scream silently**

**Hit a pillow /
soft object**

Listen to music

**Look after an
animal or
sibling**

**Draw red lines
on the skin**

**Clench ice
cubes**

**Snap elastic
band on wrist**



Alternative coping strategies

Explore ideas for alternate coping strategies in the short term to improve wellbeing (see separate handout)

Ideas to help when a young person:

- Feels like self-harming
- Needs to vent their feelings
- Feels down or alone
- Needs a distraction
- Feels out of control
- Needs some space to think
- Needs to feel more in control

Alternative coping strategies



Pick one or two initially try them out and review:

- Was it helpful? Did it work?
- Would you use it again?
- What else could you try?

Box of Tricks...

Candy :p Funky Stress Ball A colouring and activity book Mazes and Word-Searches



Brave (DVD) A cuddly toy (that also ribbets!)

Books that make me happy!

Meaningful Journal

Finger Paints Rubber Bands Feather Chinese Finger Puzzle Play-Dough Coloured pencils



Mind Full, or Mindful?



**How can I help?
(practical strategies)**

**Free pass to
leave class**

**Somewhere
safe to go**

**Explain
pupil might
arrive late**

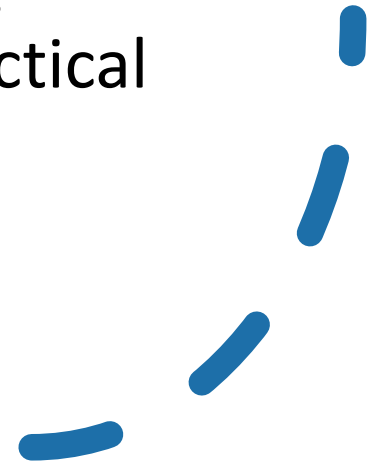
**Someone to
talk to**

**Reduced
timetable**

**Homework
extensions**

Summary: How you can help

- Arrange appropriate medical care
- **Listen** to the young person and be mindful of your reactions
- Provide access to information
- Tell other people (where appropriate)
- Talk about other coping strategies and offer practical advice





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If you remember 3 things...

1

Self-harm
is a coping
mechanism

2

Trust your
gut. If
you're
worried,
follow up

3

LISTEN



Any questions?



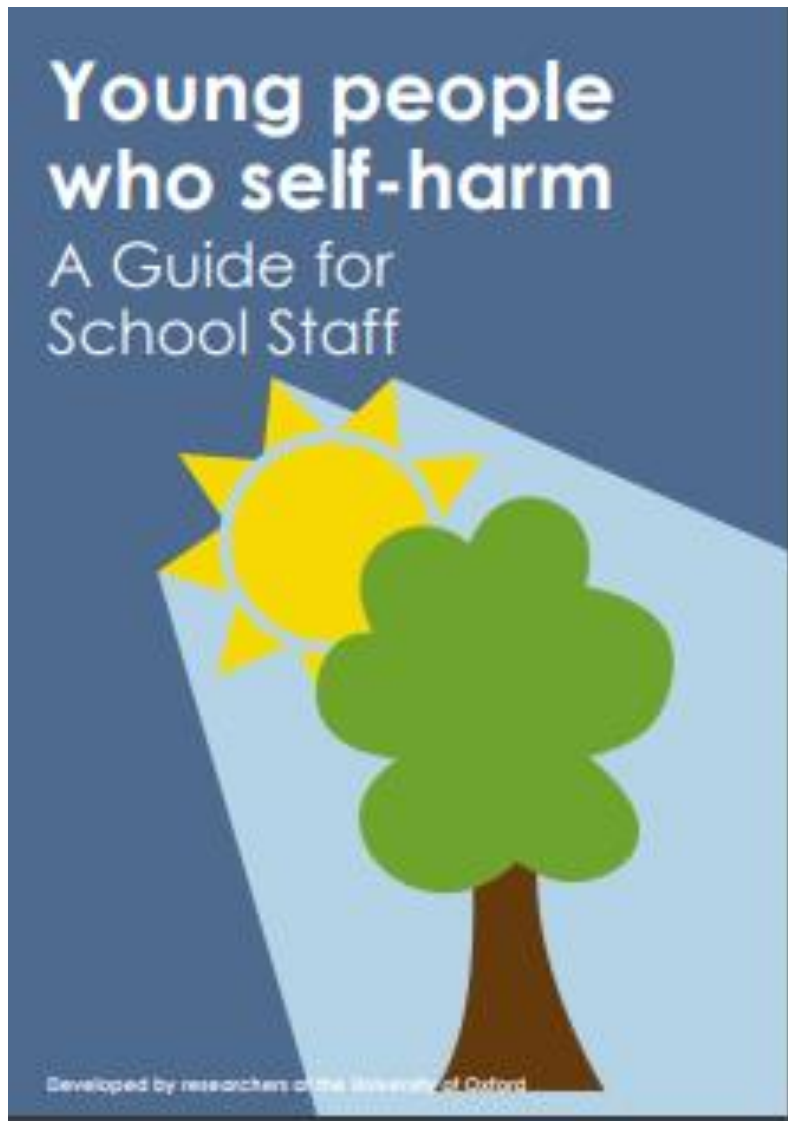
**CAN YOU THINK OF THREE THINGS
THAT YOU KNOW NOW THAT YOU
DIDN'T KNOW BEFORE THIS
SESSION?**



**CAN YOU THINK OF ONE THING
THAT YOU WILL DO DIFFERENTLY
AS A RESULT OF THIS SESSION?**



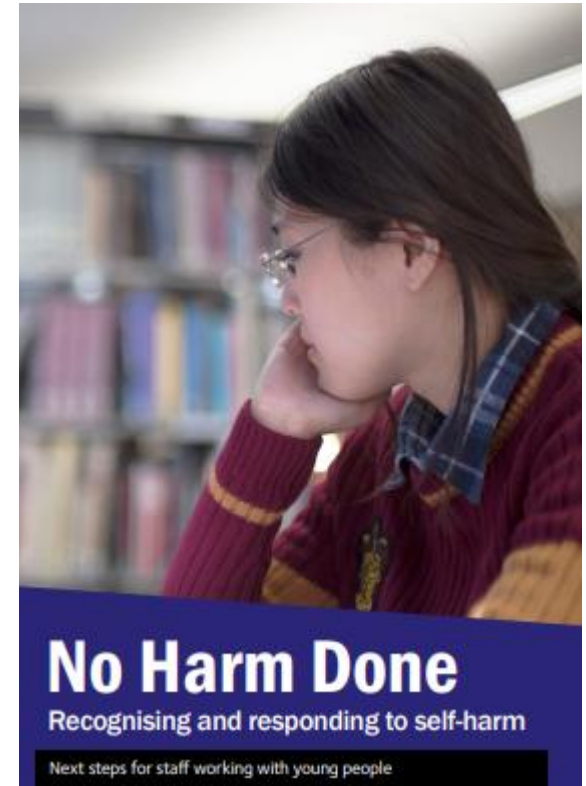
LINKS & RESOURCES



<https://charliewaller.org/resources/coping-with-self-harm/>

No Harm Done:

Information for young people, parents and staff



<https://youngminds.org.uk/youngminds-professionals/our-projects/no-harm-done/>

Further Sources of Information

www.selfharm.co.uk

www.charliewaller.org

www.youngminds.org.uk

www.mind.org.uk

www.nshn.co.uk/downloads.html

www.barnados.org.uk

www.minded.org.uk

www.mindmate.org.uk/resources

[/in-our-hands-resources-for-professionals](http://www.mindmate.org.uk/resources/in-our-hands-resources-for-professionals)