

# Prisoners-Self Harm

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Being in prison can be a difficult time. This factsheet says how you can get help if you want to hurt yourself.



KEY POINTS

- Self-harm is when you hurt yourself on purpose, for example, by scratching, cutting, biting or burning.
- Self-harm is common in prisons.
- You may self-harm because you find it difficult to cope with your moods or share how you are feeling. Everyone has their own reasons for self-harming.
- Self-harm is always a sign that something is wrong. It is not always a sign of a mental illness.
- There are people that can help you.
- There are things you can try on your own to help you self-harm less and more safely.

**This factsheet covers:**

1. [What is self-harm?](#)
2. [Who self-harms?](#)
3. [Why do people self-harm?](#)
4. [Who can help?](#)
5. [How can I help myself?](#)
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## 1. What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when you harm yourself on purpose. There are many ways people self-harm.

- Cutting
- Burning
- Scalding with hot water
- Banging or scratching your body
- Breaking bones
- Hair pulling or picking your skin
- Self-strangulation
- Sticking sharp objects into your body
- Taking things that are poisonous
- Doing things that will lead to other prisoners attacking you
- Not letting wounds heal

Self-harm can include taking drugs or drinking too much alcohol to harm yourself. This is different to drinking or taking drugs for pleasure.<sup>1</sup> An overdose of drugs or alcohol can have a serious effect on your health.

Self-harm and suicidal thoughts can be different. People who feel suicidal want to take their own life. If you self-harm it does not always mean you want to end your life.

## 2. Who self-harms?

In a report from 2014 it was found that 7.3 percent of the people surveyed had self-harmed without suicidal intent during their lifetime.<sup>2</sup> It can happen at any age. People who self-harm are more likely to be:<sup>3</sup>

- female,
- a young person,
- in prison,
- an asylum seeker,
- a veteran of the armed forces,
- gay, lesbian or bisexual,
- friends with people that also self-harm, or
- survivors of physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a child.

## 3. Why do people self-harm?

There are lots of reasons you might self-harm. For example:

- fear of coming into prison for the first time,

- anxiety about being on remand,
- feeling alone,
- loss of control over your life, and
- worrying about something outside, such as money, work or family.

In prison you have a lot of spare time. You might spend this time thinking about the past or problems you have. Self-harming might make you feel better if you are finding it difficult to cope with how you are feeling. It can also show others how you are feeling. But usually you only feel better for a short time.

You might self-harm to have some control. It can be frightening going into prison and you might feel you have no control over your life now.

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#### 4. Who can help?

##### **Safer Custody Team**

Your prison will have a 'Safer Custody Team' (SCT). The SCT help to manage self-harm and suicide in prison.<sup>4</sup> If any staff member thinks you are at risk of self-harm or suicide, you will get help under the 'ACCT' process. This stands for 'Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork'. Any member of prison staff who is worried about you might record their concerns on a form. The prison will then plan how they can keep you safe.

Speak to a prison officer if you want help for self-harm. They can pass this information on to the SCT.

##### **Personal officer**

All Young Offenders Institutions (YOI) have personal officer schemes.<sup>5</sup> Some adult prisons also have personal officers.<sup>6</sup> You can go to them for information, advice or to talk about problems. If you are concerned about how you are feeling in prison, your personal officer can be a good person to speak to. If you are unsure who your personal officer is you can ask a member of staff.

##### **Prison chaplain**

A prison chaplain is available to provide spiritual guidance and counselling. If you do not have a faith you can see a humanist pastoral support visitor.<sup>7</sup>

##### **Listeners**

The Listener scheme is a peer support service which aims to reduce suicide and self-harm in prisons.<sup>8</sup> Prisoners are trained and supported by the Samaritans to become Listeners. Listeners can provide confidential emotional support to you when you are struggling to cope.

##### **Insiders**

The Insiders scheme trains selected prisoner volunteers.<sup>9</sup> The volunteer will give you basic information and reassurance when you are new to

prison. The Insiders scheme aims to help you feel less anxious during your first few days in prison.

### **The Samaritans**

The Samaritans work with prisons to reduce self-harm and suicide among prisoners. You can get help from them in a number of ways. Their details can be found at the end of this factsheet.

If there is no Listener scheme available, volunteers from the local Samaritans branch may visit the prison to give you face to face support.

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## **5. How can I help myself?**

### **Deciding to stop**

The first step is to decide that you want to stop self-harming. If you are not sure, it could be more difficult. You should not agree to stop just because other people want you to.<sup>10</sup> You might not want to stop at the moment, but thinking about it is the first step.

If you are struggling to decide try keeping a list of reasons you want to stop and why you don't want to stop. This might help you decide what you want to do.

Once you have decided to stop, there are things you can do to control your self-harm. Everybody is different and what works for someone else may not work for you. Try different things to find out what works for you.

### **Delay self-harm**

You may self-harm straight away when you are distressed. By telling yourself to wait you might not self-harm as much or as often.<sup>11</sup>

Start by waiting 15 minutes after you want to self harm. In the future try extending the length of time you wait. This gives you time to try some other ways to manage how you feel.

Before harming, write down the answers to these questions. This can help you to delay self-harm.

- Why do I feel I need to hurt myself? What has happened to make me feel like this? How do I feel right now?
- Have I been here before? What did I do to deal with it? How did I feel then?
- What have I done to make myself feel better before? What else can I do that won't hurt me?
- Do I need to hurt myself? How will I feel when I am hurting myself?
- How will I feel after hurting myself? How will I feel tomorrow morning?

- Can I avoid what has made me feel like this, or deal with it better in the future?

### **Non-harmful ways to manage how I am feeling**

There are some non-harmful things you can try when you feel like harming yourself. Such as:

- speak to someone like a prisoner, Listener, Insider or staff,
- ring a family member or a friend or write them a letter,
- write your negative thoughts down, then rip up the paper,
- find other ways to show your feelings such as writing, drawing and doing prison activities,
- allow yourself to cry,
- try exercising in your cell, massaging or drawing on the place you want to hurt yourself, or
- distract yourself by choosing a random object and thinking of 30 different uses for it.

### Mindfulness

Some people find mindfulness useful. Mindfulness is a type of meditation. It is when you focus on your mind and body. It is a way of paying attention to the present moment. To practice mindfulness try focusing on your breathing. Think about how it feels when you breathe in and out. Mindfulness may teach you to be more aware of your thoughts and feelings. Once you are more aware of your thoughts and feelings, you can learn to deal with them better.<sup>12</sup>

### Yoga

Yoga is an exercise. It has a focus on breathing techniques, strength and flexibility to improve how you feel. Yoga can help to reduce depression and stress.<sup>13</sup> Some prisons have yoga classes that you can join.

There are yoga classes on National Prison radio<sup>14</sup>. You may be able to find books on meditation or yoga in the prison library. Or you can ask the Prison Phoenix Trust to send you free CDs and books on yoga and meditation.<sup>15</sup>

### **I can't stop self harming, how can I stay safe?**

You might want to stop self-harming, but feel you can't do it right now. In the meantime, try to reduce the damage you do when you self-harm. This is called harm-minimisation. There are some suggestions below.<sup>16</sup>

- Do not share self-harming tools with other people. There is a risk you could get a disease such as chlamydia, syphilis, hepatitis B, HIV and AIDS.
- Don't self harm on areas you have lots of scars. Scar tissue may not be as strong as your skin.
- Avoid drugs or alcohol, which can affect your judgement.

- Before you start self-harming, set yourself limits and stick to them. Decide on self-harm that is just enough to relieve distress but no more. This is a good way of learning the skills you need to stop eventually.
- Think of options that do not break your skin or involve taking substances.

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## 6. Information for friends and relatives

You may have concerns about your friend or relative when they are in prison. Especially if they had problems with self-harm before going inside and you think prison will make it worse.

If you're worried that your friend or relative is self-harming in prison then you can:

- tell a member of prison staff when you visit,
- contact the prison's 'Safer Custody Team', or
- the Duty Governor.

Some prisons run confidential Safer Custody hotlines where you can leave a message explaining your concerns.<sup>17</sup>

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### **Samaritans**

There are different ways for prisoners to contact Samaritans. All prisons should have direct lines to either the local branch or the national number.

**Telephone:** 116 123

**Address:** Freepost RRYU-CBCR-TRSX, Samaritans, PO Box 90 90, Stirling, FK8 2SA

**Website:** [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

### **C.A.L.M. (Campaign Against Living Miserably)**

This organisation help men dealing with suicidal thoughts or emotional distress.

**Telephone (outside London):** 0800 58 58 58 (5pm to midnight, 7 days per week)

**Telephone (London):** 0808 802 5858 (5pm to midnight, 7 days per week)

**Address:** CALM, PO Box 68766, London SE1P 4JZ

**Webchat:** [through the website](#)

**Website:** [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net)

### **Sane**

Sane run a national, out-of-hours helpline. They offer emotional support and information to anyone affected by mental illness. This includes family, friends and carers.

**Telephone:** 0300 304 7000 (4.30pm to 10.30pm 7 days per week)

**Website:** [www.sane.org.uk](http://www.sane.org.uk)

### **SupportLine**

They offer confidential emotional support to everyone by telephone, email and post. They can talk to you about any issue.

**Telephone:** 01708 765200 (hours change, ring to find out)

**Address:** PO Box 2860, Romford, Essex RM7 1JA

**E-mail:** [info@supportline.org.uk](mailto:info@supportline.org.uk)

**Website:** <http://www.supportline.org.uk/>

### **Switchboard – LGBT + Helpline**

Switchboard gives practical and emotional support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people. You can talk to them about any issue.

**Telephone:** 0300 330 0630 (open 10am – 11pm)

**E-mail:** [chris@switchboard.lgbt0020z](mailto:chris@switchboard.lgbt0020z)

**Webchat:** [through the website](#)

**Website:** [www.switchboard.lgbt](http://www.switchboard.lgbt)

### **Prison Phoenix Trust**

They help prisoners with yoga and meditation in prison. Run yoga classes on National Prison radio. You can ask them to send free books to help with relaxation in your cell.

**Telephone:** 01865 512 521

**Address:** The Prison Phoenix Trust, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF

**Website:** [www.theppt.org.uk](http://www.theppt.org.uk)

### **Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPt)**

Deliver drug and alcohol services to people in prison and the community.

**Telephone:** 020 3752 5560

**Address:** The Foundry, 2nd Floor, 17 Oval Way, London, SE11 5RR

**Website:** [www.rapt.org.uk](http://www.rapt.org.uk)

### **Alcoholics Anonymous Great Britain**

Provide guidance, support and encouragement to prisoners. Provide meetings and visit. Can provide support upon release

**Telephone:** 0800 9177 650

**Address:** Alcoholics Anonymous, PO Box 1, 10 Toft Green, York YO1 7NJ.

**Website:** [www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk](http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk)



- <sup>1</sup> NHS Choices. *Self Harm*. [www.nhs.uk/conditions/Self-injury/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Self-injury/Pages/Introduction.aspx) [Accessed 06 April 2017].
- <sup>2</sup> McManus S, Hassiotis A, Jenkins R, Dennis M, Aznar C, Appleby L. *Chapter 12: Suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and self-harm*. Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014. Leeds: NHS Digital; 2016. Page 303.
- <sup>3</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Self harm*. [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/self-harm.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/self-harm.aspx) [Accessed 06 April 2017].
- <sup>4</sup> Ministry of Justice. *Management of prisoners at risk of harm to self, to others and from others (safer custody)*, PSI 64/2011. London: Ministry of Justice; 2013. Page 7.
- <sup>5</sup> H.M. Prison and Probation Service. *Young Adult Offenders*. [www.justice.gov.uk/offenders/types-of-offender/young-adult-offenders](http://www.justice.gov.uk/offenders/types-of-offender/young-adult-offenders) [Accessed 06 April 2017].
- <sup>6</sup> Ministry of Justice. *Residential Services*. PSI 10/2011. London : Ministry of Justice ; 2011. Page 2.
- <sup>7</sup> British Humanist Association. *Chaplaincy and pastoral support*. [www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/chaplaincy-and-pastoral-support](http://www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/chaplaincy-and-pastoral-support) [Accessed 06 April 2017].
- <sup>8</sup> The Samaritans. *The Listener Scheme*. [www.samaritans.org/your-community/our-work-prisons/listener-scheme](http://www.samaritans.org/your-community/our-work-prisons/listener-scheme) [Accessed 06 April 2017]
- <sup>9</sup> As note 4, at page 22.
- <sup>10</sup> Middleton, K. & Garvie, S. *Self Harm – The Path to Recovery*. Oxford: Lion Hudson; 2008. Page 57.
- <sup>11</sup> As note 10, at page 62.
- <sup>12</sup> NHS Choices. *Mindfulness*. [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx#how](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mindfulness.aspx#how) [Accessed 07 April 2017].
- <sup>13</sup> NHS Choices. *A Guide to Yoga*. <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/yoga.aspx> [Accessed 07 April 2017].
- <sup>14</sup> Prison Radio Association. *National Prison Radio*. <https://www.prisonradioassociation.org/national-prison-radio/> (accessed 25 April 2017).
- <sup>15</sup> The Prison Phoenix Trust. *Yoga and meditation in a prison cell*. [www.theppt.org.uk](http://www.theppt.org.uk) [Accessed 10 April 2017].
- <sup>16</sup> As note 10, at page 69.
- <sup>17</sup> Gov.UK. *Prison Life*. [www.gov.uk/life-in-prison/vulnerable-prisoners](http://www.gov.uk/life-in-prison/vulnerable-prisoners) [Accessed 10 April 2017].

This factsheet is available  
in large print.



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## Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

**Phone 0300 5000 927**  
**Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm**  
**(excluding bank holidays)**

**Email [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)**

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### Did this help?

We'd love to know if this information helped you.

**Drop us a line at:** [feedback@rethink.org](mailto:feedback@rethink.org)

**or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:**

RAIS  
PO Box 17106  
Birmingham B9 9LL

**or call us on 0300 5000 927.**

We're open 9:30am to 4pm  
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



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### Need more help?

Go to **[www.rethink.org](http://www.rethink.org)** for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

### Don't have access to the web?

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### Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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