

# Supporting your child

## Self-harm and Suicide



**PAPYRUS**  
PREVENTION OF YOUNG SUICIDE

# About this guide

This guide has been created following discussions with parents who have experience of supporting a young person struggling with their mental health.

The aim of this guide is to provide information and guidance and to help parents cope with a young person who is struggling with thoughts of suicide. To reassure them that they are not alone.

**There is help and there is HOPE.**

This guide has been commissioned by parents who lost their 15 year old son to suicide and who want to help others.

**Dedicated to Max. #Forever15**



# Self-Harm & Self-Injury

The term 'self-harm' or 'self-injury' usually refers to someone causing themselves harm. Self-harm is often a physical response to emotional pain and/or intolerable experiences. It can also include self-neglect and engaging in risk taking behaviour.

Self-harm has a function for every individual who self-harms and stopping is not always straightforward even when they may want to.



# What causes someone to self-harm?

Self-harm or self-injury is a very different experience for every person.

For many young people self-harm is used as a coping mechanism. However, it is important to remember that everyone's reasons for self-harming are individual to them.

Control, release, punishment, compulsion and expression are just a selection of reasons as to why someone may injure themselves. Sometimes, self-harm can also be a reaction to overwhelming life events that may feel unmanageable.



As a parent you may be feeling lost when trying to offer support. Learning that your child has been self-harming can be extremely difficult to come to terms with. Know that you are not alone and there is help out there.

The Charlie Waller Trust have a great resource that may help you to better understand what your loved one is going through and help you to support them. Developed by the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford, you can find it here <https://www.cwmt.org.uk/>



# Self-Harm and Suicide Risk

It is important that you are aware that sometimes, self-harm is associated with suicidal behaviour or ideation. It is also important to know that whilst self-harm is common in young people, suicide is rare.

We do know from research that more than half of people who die by suicide have had a history of self-harm (NHS 2018)

50% ↑

If you are concerned that your child may be experiencing thoughts of suicide, the only way to be sure is to ask them directly.

We know that this can be difficult and some parents would worry about talking to their child about suicide. Research tells us that talking about suicide does not put the idea into their head.

In fact, talking with your child about suicide creates a safe space for them to be open and honest about how they feel and they will see you as a safe person to turn to.



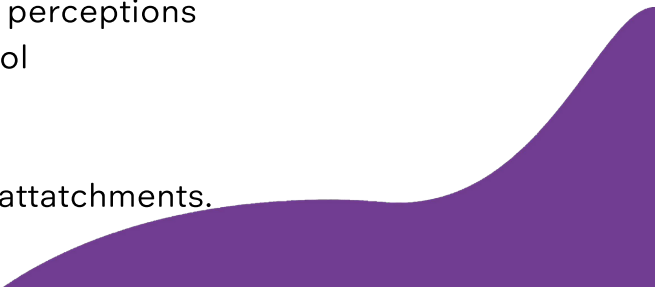
# Why might my child self-harm?

Every child is different. They have different experiences and different ways of dealing with challenges. Some young people will self-harm to help them to cope with a particular challenge in their life. They could be struggling with anger or anxiety and use self-harm as a way to release these feelings or to communicate their emotional pain.

It is also common for those who self-harm to feel powerless or lack self-esteem and therefore use self-harm as a way to regain some control. We also hear from young people who have feelings of self-loathing and that self-harm is used to punish themselves.

## Risk Factors

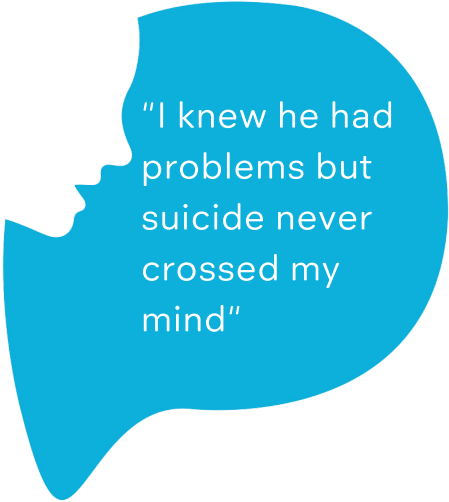
Young people are more likely to be at risk of self-harming if certain risk factors are present in their lives. This is not an exhaustive list and not every child who is experiencing a challenge outlined below will self-harm. Equally, not every child who is self-harming will be experiencing these issues.

- Loss of a parent
  - Childhood illness or surgery
  - Childhood sexual or physical abuse
  - Family substance abuse
  - Negative body image perceptions
  - Lack of impulse control
  - Childhood trauma
  - Neglect
  - Lack of strong family attachments.
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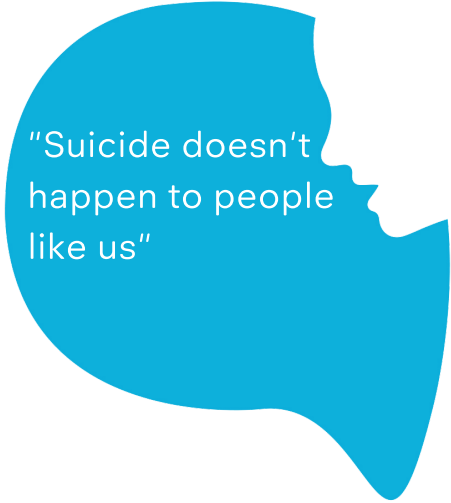
# Talking about suicide

Talking to your child about suicidal thoughts can be difficult and feel very daunting. Remember - starting the conversation is the most important thing.

Parents who have lost a child to suicide often tell us that they never thought suicide was something that would ever happen to them.



"I knew he had problems but suicide never crossed my mind"



"Suicide doesn't happen to people like us"

By talking openly and safely, we can break the silence that exists around suicide.

# Asking the question

These simple steps may help you to ask your child if they are thinking about suicide.

**Ask directly.** Use the word suicide. Practice asking first if this helps. It may give you more confidence.

**Stay calm.** This is important as your child may be looking at how you react to decide how much they should tell you.

**Be clear and direct.** Look them in the eye and ask 'are you thinking about suicide?'



If you are unsure of how to start the conversation, contact our helpline HOPELINEUK. Our specially trained advisers can talk you through what to say and how to support your child during this conversation.

Talking with a young person about suicide can be very difficult. If you need support following your conversation our advisers are on hand to de-brief with you and help you to process what has been said and where to go next.

**0800 068 4141**



# What if they say yes?

If your child says that they have had, or are currently experiencing, thoughts of suicide the most important thing to do is **STAY CALM**. Acknowledge how difficult it must be for them to open up and tell them you are there to listen.

As a parent it can be really hard to understand what is happening to your child. **Trying to understand why they are feeling this way can be frustrating**. Some parents have said that they felt that their child was trying to punish them or deliberately hurt them.

**Revealing thoughts of suicide is a difficult but incredibly brave thing for a young person to do. The reasons why people experience thoughts of suicide are complex and differ from person to person and you may never fully understand them and that is OK.**

**Stay calm - Ask directly - Be clear and direct**

**HOPELINEUK**

Call: 0800 068 4141

Text: 07860 039 967

Email: [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)

9am - 10pm weekdays

2pm - 10pm weekends and bank holidays

# How can I help?

As a parent your first reaction will probably be to try and fix things for your child and to make things better for them.


Hold back. Use your strength to **stay calm and let them talk**. They will need time and space to feel safe in talking through how they are feeling. **Allow for silences and listen non judgmentally to what they have to say**.

Experiencing thoughts of suicide can be extremely isolating and very daunting. You may be unsure of the best way to respond and be worried about saying the wrong thing.

**Just being there in the moment with your child will show that you care and that you are a safe person for them to talk to. Connect with them and let them know how brave they are and that you are there to help them.**

There may be times when your child is struggling and they feel like a stranger to you. You may not recognise some of their behaviours. Remember that often when a child experiences distress they lash out at the ones they love the most.

This is a result of what they are going through and they still need your support.



# How can I help?

There are lots of things you can do to help your child cope right now.

Help them to just focus on getting through this moment rather than thinking too far ahead into the future

Help them to stay away from drugs or alcohol

If they contact you and they are away from home encourage them to get to a safe place

Encourage them to spend time with other people

Let them know the importance of doing things they enjoy

Work with them on a plan to keep them safe



# Looking after you

Worrying about your child can be exhausting and often isolating. You may even find it difficult talking to others, even family members, about the situation.

People respond in different ways to stressful situations. It can influence the way we think and behave and often comes from a place of fear. You may find yourself pushing loved ones away or lashing out at people or even blaming others for what is happening to your child.

**This is a completely normal reaction for many.**

Watching your child go through a mental health crisis can be a very painful experience. There will be times when you need to take a deep breath and reach out for help yourself.

**Take time for yourself doing the things that you enjoy**

Help your child build a support network so that you are not on your own. This could be a health professional but these are not daily interactions. Consider also a trusted family member or friend.

Build and use your own support network. Support offered is usually aimed at the child, leaving parents feeling even more isolated and lost. Family therapy may be an option for you.

**Parents often regret not knowing about HOPELINEUK until it is too late.**

# "Keeping my daughter safe"

## CASE STUDY

The first I heard that my daughter, Kat, had thoughts of suicide was a phone call from the school nurse when she was studying for her GCSE's.

### **The shock was immense.**

She was sent home after an appointment was made with the doctor. It was like the worst nightmare happening in real life in my family, to my beloved daughter.

### **How could this be so?**

The doctor was great and really listened to her, but the school made us feel that we'd failed – Kat and me – with the only contact being complaints that she was missing lessons to attend CAMHS appointments.



# "Keeping my daughter safe"


## CASE STUDY

We both felt at a complete loss. We talked about how she was feeling, and she grew to know that she could talk to me whenever she felt bad, but we felt so isolated and out of our depth.

Had I known then what I now know, I would have encouraged Kat to contact PAPYRUS at the earliest opportunity, and I also would have sought their help, advice and support.

It's too painful a road to travel alone when there are people trained to help in such situations.

The work of Papyrus brings hope and light into what can feel a very dark and overwhelming situation. I urge anyone who is feeling suicidal or knows someone who is, to pick up the phone, text or email for their support.



# "We were alone facing a situation we had no experience with"


## CASE STUDY

We were alone facing a situation we had no experience with.

We were in NHS emergency when, at our weakest, CAMHS threatened to section our son. We were offered a bed for him more than 200 miles away from home, so we turned to private care.

CAMHS closed his case when we admitted our son into a local private hospital, where he stayed for 6 weeks, mostly as an in-patient. Upon dismissal, when he was almost 15, he saw his psychiatrist every 3 months with us and a therapist weekly on his own.

We were offered family therapy which our son refused and we were not provided with any alternative support. There was no advice offered to us as to how best to care for our delicate son. We felt excluded from our son's treatment and more lost than before.



# "We were alone facing a situation we had no experience with"

## CASE STUDY

We searched on the web for everything that we thought might help - but we didn't search 'suicide'.

We still don't understand why we didn't. If we had, maybe we would have come across PAPYRUS who, we know now, would have held us, listened to us and reassured us that we were not alone.

During that time we visited the GP and pharmacists many times. We wondered why, alongside all the other potentially fatal conditions for which there are information leaflets, there wasn't one for suicidal thoughts. We were sent home with no care instructions for our son.

Our hope is that other parents feel empowered and equipped with knowledge and resources to keep their loved one safe from suicide. For loved ones to be able to live the best quality and longest life possible, which sadly our son missed out on.

