

# SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM



**World Health  
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE **Eastern Mediterranean**

## What are suicide and self-harm?

### What is self-harm?

Self-harm is when somebody injures or harms themselves to cope with or express extreme emotional distress and internal turmoil. They do not generally intend to kill themselves, but the results can be fatal. Examples of self-harm include trying to poison oneself by taking too many tablets (medicines or something harmful), cutting or burning, banging head against objects, punching or hitting yourself against something hard. Usually, people who self-harm do not intend to kill themselves.

### What is suicide?

Suicide is the act of intentionally carrying out an action to kill oneself. Every year nearly 800 000 people commit suicide, which equates to one person every 40 seconds, and many more people attempt suicide. Every suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities and entire countries and has long-lasting effects on the people left behind. Suicide can occur at any age, from young adolescence to old age. It was the second most common cause of death among 15 to 29-year-olds around the world in 2016.

### Common signs and symptoms of self-harm and suicide –how to spot someone at risk

Signs of self-harm include:

- unexplained cuts, bruises or cigarette burns, usually on someone's wrists, arms, thighs and chest;
- keeping themselves always fully covered regardless of the weather; and
- signs of depression – a lack of motivation or interest in anything, self-loathing and expressing a wish to punish themselves, being withdrawn from others, and signs of low self-esteem such as blaming themselves for every problem or thinking they are not good enough for something.

Warning signs of suicide include:

- talking or writing about death or killing oneself;
- withdrawing from usual relationships or social activities;
- looking depressed and showing feelings of being trapped and hopeless;
- showing signs of extreme guilt and self-reproach, and that their life is not worth living;
- gathering the means of suicide, for example stocking up on pills or buying a gun;
- doing self-destructive things like driving recklessly or giving away belongings without a logical reason; and
- saying goodbye to family and friends as if they are not going to see them any more.

### What causes self-harm and suicide?

Self-harm and suicide may follow a series of thoughts or may be completely impulsive. Having access to dangerous means such as pesticide pills or guns increases the risk of someone hurting or killing themselves. Common causes of self-harm and suicide include:

- mental disorders, particularly depression and alcohol or substance abuse;
- personal crisis: a person facing a serious personal problem may feel unable to cope and in a desperate moment may feel suicide is the only way to deal with a condition; such life stresses may be anything from financial problems, a relationship break-up, or losing a job to unemployment, chronic pain and illness;
- experiencing constant isolation, prejudice and discrimination; examples of people at risk include refugees and migrants, indigenous people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex (LGBTI) people, asylum seekers and prisoners;
- experiencing physical, emotional or sexual abuse or being bullied, during childhood or currently;

- genetic links: people who complete suicide or who have suicidal thoughts or behaviour are more likely to have a family history of suicide;
- personality disorder: people with borderline or antisocial personality disorder are more likely to self-harm to cope with or express their inner psychological conflicts; and
- experiencing chronic pain, physical disorders and disabilities.

By far the strongest risk factor for suicide is a previous suicide attempt.

## When should you seek help?

Some people who self-harm find it difficult to talk to someone about it or think they can cope with their underlying problem by attempting to harm themselves. Do not ignore the problem: self-harm is a serious sign that you need professional help. See a GP to guide you to professional help, or talk to a family member or a trusted friend to help you get an appointment if you find it difficult to seek help yourself.

If you self-harm, there are situations where you need to seek help immediately. For example:

- you have taken large amount of alcohol, drugs, or prescription medication
- you are in a lot of pain
- you are having difficulty breathing
- you seriously cut or burnt yourself
- you have lost a lot of blood from a cut or a wound.

Having ideas/thoughts of suicide or plans to commit suicide is an emergency. You need to call your doctor (if you have been under treatment for depression or another mental disease), call an emergency line or suicide helpline. If for any reason you cannot seek medical help immediately, call a trusted family member or friend. Do not remain alone if you have suicidal thoughts.

## Preventing and treating self-harm and suicidal behaviours

Treatment depends on the cause of the problem, but in any case, talking to someone and asking for help is the first step.

- Make the patient's environment safe: remove means for self-harm or suicide, for example pesticides, medication and firearms.
- Mobilize the patient's social support network: inform their family members, friends, or anyone who cares for them about the situation, to maintain care and support for as long as the risk exists.
- If there is a serious threat, the doctor may ask for hospitalization to prevent serious harm or a fatal act.
- There are different psychotherapy and psycho-education approaches to help if someone has repeated self-harm or suicidal thoughts: cognitive behavioural therapy, training in problem-solving skills, family therapy and education.
- Medicines can help with treatment of depression, anxiety or sometimes to control impulsive behaviour.

## How can you help yourself?

- Ask for help from your doctor, a trusted friend or family member.
- Recognize situations and feelings that make you feel compelled to harm yourself. Plan ways to avoid them, and share your plan with people who can help.
- Take your medicines regularly.
- Take care of yourself by eating healthily, sleep regularly and avoiding alcohol and recreational drugs.
- Get involved with others: spend time with friends and love ones.
- Take part in self-help groups: they are a good source of support.
- If you have injuries due to self-harm, ask for help for in treating wounds or any medical problem caused by it.

- Avoid websites and social media forums that glorify self-harm or suicide.
- Try to talk about your emotions and express them through words, not through acts.

## How can you help someone who self-harms?

To help someone who self-harms, talk to them in an understanding way while paying attention to their problem. Show them that self-harm is common and is not just happening to them (maybe you can share this leaflet). Help them to find a doctor or help centre, and accompany them in their appointments. Help them to understand their situation as a problem, not an immoral or shameful act.

But do not try to be their therapist. They need professional help, and even if you are a professional, you cannot play this role for them as a friend or family member. Do not expect them to change their behaviour overnight, and get upset and angry if they don't. Do not struggle with them when they are about to self-harm as it may increase the harm; it is better to be vigilant but walk away and tell them they can come and talk about it rather than do it. Do not force them to promise not to do it again or threaten them with any punishment if they do it again (like saying you won't see them again if they don't stop self-harming), and do not be judgmental or criticize them.

## How can you help someone with suicidal thoughts?

Thoughts of suicide or a suicide attempt constitute an emergency. If you see warning signs and a significant change in behaviour, get help as soon as possible. If the person has been under treatment for a mental disorder, contact their doctor. Otherwise, call a helpline or make an urgent appointment with a doctor or counsellor as soon as possible. If the person has talked to you about suicide, do not leave them alone; ask for help from other family members or friends, and do not promise the person you will keep their situation secret because you cannot.

If you are concerned that someone has suicidal thoughts, you can ask them directly. It is a myth that if you ask someone about suicide, you are putting the idea in their head.

If you see someone posting about death and suicide in social media, take it seriously and ask for help.

*This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: [www.emro.who.int/mnh](http://www.emro.who.int/mnh).*