

Messages for practice: Working with Suicide and Self-Harm

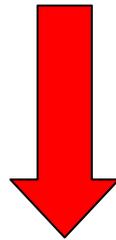
Children and young people do not always seek help with suicidal thoughts – any worrying signs or any disclosures need to be taken seriously and acted upon. You may only have one chance to make a difference.

Be alert to the signs and symptoms of self-harming behaviour and know how to respond sensitively. Always think about what is contributing to the behaviour and what should be done next to best support and protect the young person.



Never work in isolation with a young person who is self-harming or expressing suicidal thoughts – you will need support too! Discuss your concerns with the designated Child Protection person within your organization.

There are many agencies that can offer support to young people experiencing emotional difficulties. Family Information Services are available in every Local Authority and will sign post you to local services.



Information on dealing with Self Harm and Thoughts of Suicide in young people is contained in the regional guidance – <http://www.blaenau-gwent-lscb.org.uk/harm.html>

‘For suicide and self-harm prevention to be successful it has to be truly everybody’s concern’.

This Briefing is based on the regional document ‘Information on Dealing with Self-Harm and Thoughts of Suicide in Young People’ and on the findings of local case reviews. It includes input from a range of different agencies such as health, education and social services and is aimed at front-line professionals and volunteers who work with young people.

Signs and Symptoms of Self-Harming Behaviours

Self-harm is the term used when a young person deliberately hurts or injures themselves. It is usually done in private and is an expression of personal distress. Some young people self-harm as a way of coping with psychological distress, and can find it extremely difficult to stop or reduce such behaviours. Just over 10% of secondary school pupils are estimated to self-harm with a high prevalence among females aged 15 – 19. The most common form of self-harm is cutting. Signs can include obvious cuts or scratches, regularly bandaged arms or wearing long sleeves even during hot weather. Emotional and behavioural changes within a young person may also raise concern. If a young person discloses self-harm, listen to them calmly and encourage them to talk about any external stresses that are causing their distress. Consider carefully whether there is any indication that the young person is being abused or harmed by any one else and whether a child protection referral is required. Talk with the young person and your manager about what might help and what should happen next.

Responding to a young person with suicidal intent

The reduction and prevention of suicide is an important public health issue – it is the most common cause of death in the UK in boys and men up to the age of 35 years. Most suicides by young people are impulsive acts, so it is vitally important to be alert to any possible indicators and take these seriously. Indicators can include morbid thoughts, expressions of hopelessness or giving away possessions. It is particularly important not to overlook the emotional well-being of those young people who display high levels of risk taking or challenging behaviours coupled with poor coping or self-care skills. In these situations a young person's failure to engage in support services should not automatically trigger decisions to close down services but on the contrary should raise concerns and prompt consideration for a multi-agency risk management approach. If a young person discloses suicidal thoughts always assess the level of imminent risk, ensure that these are addressed, and seek urgent advice from health services.

Organisational Responses to suicide and self-harm

Organisations need to raise awareness of suicide and self-harm and support staff in how to respond to incidents and disclosures through training and supervision. Staff need clear information and guidance regarding issues such as when and how to report concerns, when to involve parents / carers and so on. A whole organisational approach to addressing suicide and self-harm may be required both at a preventative level and in the event of a particular critical incident or specific concern. Organisations should consider preventative measures that encourage young people to look after themselves and each other emotionally, including opportunities to talk about suicide and self-harm and how to get help.

Support Agencies and Other Services

A range of national and local services are listed within the regional guidance document, including links for the Family Information Services within each authority. It is worth being familiar with such services both as possible referral routes for young people and for the wider resources available. It is important for organisations to develop an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different local services such as health and social services, particularly contact routes in more urgent situations, and to ensure good referral pathways and information sharing arrangements.