

UNDERSTANDING **SELF HARM**

"Scars don't have to last forever"

THE **HOPE** LINE

first of all... thank you for caring

Whether you're struggling with self-harm or trying to better understand someone who is, thank you for being here. This is a difficult thing to open up about, but what you're going through is important and worth talking about.



Whatever you're going through, you're not alone.

Chat with a Hope Coach!

If you ever feel the urge to self-harm, don't face it alone. Visit TheHopeLine.com/chat-live to connect with a Hope Coach who can listen and help you find support. TheHopeLine is available 24/7.





WHAT IS SELF-HARM?

Key Truths to Understand

1 Cutting is the most common form.

Self-harm can look different from person to person, but cutting is one of the more common forms. Other behaviors, like burning, scratching, or hitting, can also happen, though they are less common. No matter how it shows up, self-harm is usually a sign of pain that goes deeper than what can be seen on the outside.

2 It doesn't always imply suicide.

It's common to assume that self-harm means someone is trying to end their life, but that's usually not the case. That doesn't make it any less serious—it just means it should be approached with a different kind of care and understanding.

3 It's more common than you may think.

It's a struggle that may feel isolating, but the truth is you are far from alone. Many people struggle quietly, and with the right support, healing is possible.

4 It's not just about getting attention.

More often, self-harm is a way of coping with pain that feels hard to put into words. Even if it's hard for others to understand, the struggle behind it is real and deserves genuine compassion.

WHY DO PEOPLE TURN TO *SELF-HARM?*

One of the most common reactions to self-harm is the question: "Why would anyone do that?" It's a fair thing to wonder since it's such a complex struggle. The truth is, there's no single answer. The reasons vary from person to person, and each one is rooted in real pain. Whatever the reason, it deserves compassion, not shame. **Here are some of the most common reasons:**

Self Punishment

Some people hurt themselves because, deep down, they believe they deserve it. Feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness can build into a belief that pain is something they've earned. Self-harm becomes a way of punishing themselves for everything they feel is wrong with who they are.



Expressing Inner Pain

Not everyone has words for what they're feeling inside. For some, self-harm is a way of making invisible pain visible, turning something they can't explain into something real and tangible. It's a way of saying "I'm hurting" when no other words seem big enough to cover it.

To Feel Something

When emotional pain gets overwhelming enough, it can shut everything else down. Some people describe going so numb that they feel completely disconnected from themselves and the world around them. Self-harm can break through that numbness, offering a moment of feeling something real when everything inside has gone quiet.



A Cry for Help

Sometimes self-harm is a way of communicating what someone can't bring themselves to say out loud. When reaching out hasn't worked, or when a person feels like no one is truly listening, hurting themselves can feel like the only way to show others how much they're struggling. It's not about seeking attention in a shallow sense. It's about desperately needing someone to see that they're not okay.



To Feel in Control

Life can feel completely out of control sometimes. Difficult home situations, ongoing trauma, or overwhelming circumstances can leave a person feeling powerless over everything around them. Self-harm can become one of the few things that feels within their control. For some, it's a way of reclaiming a sense of power when everything else feels impossible to manage.

Whatever the reason, the pain that leads someone to self-harm is real, and it matters. No reason makes self-harm a healthy or good response to that pain. But the person struggling with it deserves compassion, not judgment.

Potential **SIGNS** of Self-Harm

- Unexplained cuts, bruises, burns, or scars that keep appearing without a clear explanation
- Blood stains on clothing, towels, or bedding
- Sharp objects like razors or knives found in unusual places, such as a bedroom
- Frequent "accidents" paired with excuses that don't quite add up
- Consistently wearing long sleeves, pants, or layered clothing to cover up, even in warm weather
- Spending long stretches of time alone in a bedroom or bathroom
- Becoming increasingly withdrawn, irritable, or emotionally unpredictable
- Expressing feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or like they're a burden to the people around them
- Talking about self-harm, or expressing a desire to hurt themselves
- Declining performance at school or work, loss of focus or motivation

HEALTHY COPING



When the urge to self-harm hits, it can feel like it takes over everything. Having a plan ready gives you something to hold onto in that moment. **These ideas can help you feel more prepared and more in control the next time those feelings rise up.**

Make Your Space Safer

Putting a healthy distance between you and the things you might reach for can make a real difference in a hard moment. Ask a trusted friend or family member to help you set up your space in a way that feels safer and more supportive.

Tune Into What You're Feeling

When the urge shows up, pause and notice what's going on inside. What are you feeling, and what might be behind it? Naming your emotions helps you understand them and work through them in a healthier way.

Have A Plan Ready

Decide ahead of time what you'll do when the urge comes. You might reach out to someone you trust, step into a different space, or pour the feeling into something creative (like the Butterfly Project below). Write your plan down and keep it somewhere you'll see it.



Find What Works for You

The urge can come from all kinds of places, so the thing that helps will look different for everyone. Depending on what you're feeling, try some of these:

When it's a way to release a sense of pain

- Paint or draw
- Keep a journal to write out your thoughts and feelings
- Write a poem or song

When you're looking for calm or comfort

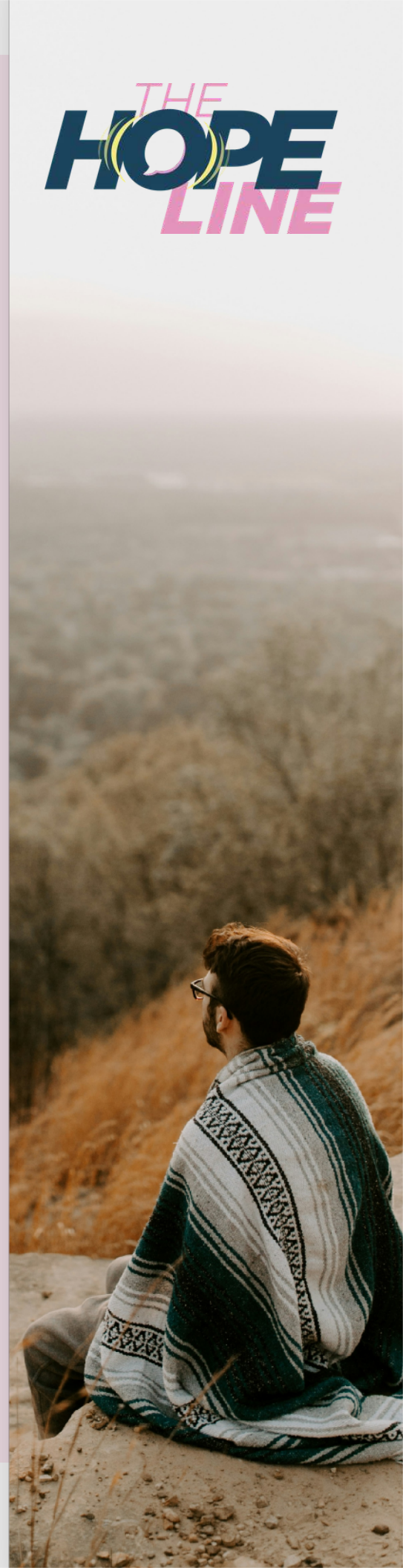
- Take a warm bath or shower
- Put on music that soothes you
- Spend time with a pet
- Wrap up in a cozy blanket

When you feel numb or disconnected

- Call a friend to talk
- Get together with friends and do something fun
- Go outside and take in what's around you, what you see, hear, and feel
- Do something with your hands, like cooking or working on a craft

When you need to release tension or anger

- Get moving with a run or a workout
- Squeeze a stress ball or mold some Play-Doh
- Tear up something like an old magazine
- Make some noise by playing an instrument



The Butterfly Project

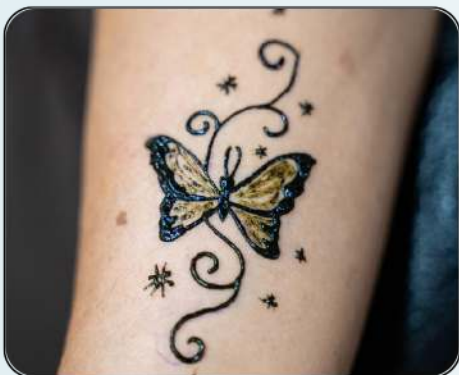
Sometimes the hardest part of resisting an urge is not having anything to do instead. The Butterfly Project gives you something to hold onto in that moment. **It's a simple, creative practice that many people have found helpful when they're working to move away from self-harm.**

Instead of harming yourself, you draw a butterfly on your skin and name it after someone who loves you. As long as the butterfly stays, it's a reminder that you're cared for and capable of getting through the moment. It's become a meaningful tool for many navigating recovery, and it's still something people lean on today.



How it Works

1. When you feel the urge, reach for a marker, pen, or sharpie and draw a butterfly on your arm, wrist, or hand. Temporary tattoos work too.
2. Name your butterfly after someone who loves you and wants to see you well.
Let the butterfly fade on its own, in its own time.
3. If it fades naturally without you self-harming, it's lived and flown away.
4. If you do self-harm before it fades, gently wash it away and draw a new one whenever you're ready to try again.
5. A friend or loved one can draw a butterfly on you too. Those butterflies are extra special, so take good care of them.



If you don't struggle with self-harm but know someone who does, you can draw a butterfly of your own and name it after them, then let them know. Sometimes just knowing someone's rooting for you can make all the difference.

HOW TO **OPEN UP** ABOUT IT

Opening up about self-harm is often the first, and hardest, step toward healing. **Here are a few things to keep in mind as you think about who to talk to and how to start the conversation.**

Choose someone you trust.

Look for a close friend, family member, school counselor, or religious leader, someone who will listen without judgment and genuinely wants to support you. There are people in your life who care and want to help.

Pick the right time and place.

Find a quiet moment somewhere private, away from noise and crowds. A calm setting makes it easier for both of you to really hear each other.

Lead with your feelings

Focus on what you're experiencing emotionally rather than the specific details of self-harm itself. Share why you're struggling, how it feels, and why you wanted them to know. If you can, talk about what's underneath it, whether that's a certain situation, emotion, or trigger.



Share this guide with them

This guide can help the people who love you understand what you're going through and how to walk alongside you.

Give them space to take it in.

This may be new or surprising for them. They might respond with shock, fear, or worry, and that's often just a sign of how much they care.





How to Support a **LOVED ONE** Struggling with Self Harm

When someone you love opens up about self-harm, it can be hard to know what to do or say. **Taking time to understand what they're going through is one of the most powerful ways you can support them.**

Learn about self-harm.

Understanding why self-harm happens and how recovery works can help you show up for your friend or loved one in the way they need. This guide is a great place to start, especially the sections on understanding self-harm and recognizing the signs.

Lead without judgement.

Opening up about self-harm takes real courage. Your friend or loved one trusted you enough to share something deeply personal. Try to meet them with understanding rather than shock or frustration.

Remind them you care.

Self-harm is often a sign of a deeper struggle, and sharing it with you is a big deal. Let them know you're someone they can confide in and that you care about what they're going through.



Show up for them.

Support can look like a lot of things, offering to go to counseling together, being available when the urge to self-harm hits, or simply checking in regularly. Staying present and consistent means more than you might think.

Point them toward professional support.

Self-harm often points to something deeper going on emotionally. A counselor who understands self-harm can help your friend or loved one work through what's really driving it.

Take care of yourself too.

Supporting someone through this can be heavy. If you're feeling overwhelmed or scared, talk to someone you trust. You can't pour from an empty cup, and caring for yourself helps you keep showing up for them.

"For the longest time, I was so depressed I coped by hurting myself. Then I decided I didn't want to feel that way anymore. I talked to people, saw a therapist, and reached out to TheHopeLine. With that support, I went from anxious and hopeless to happy and free."

- Lila



A SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

There are many reasons people turn to self-harm. At its core, it's often an attempt to cope with pain that feels too big to hold, even though it doesn't reach the real issue underneath. That's why having people around you, friends, family, counselors, who can offer support and encouragement matters so much.

Whatever you've faced or are still facing, know that you are loved. The Bible reminds us that God knows the plans He has for you, "plans to take care of you, not abandon you," and to give you a future full of hope (Jeremiah 29:11, The Message).

You are loved and accepted, no matter what your past holds or what you're walking through right now. God wants a real relationship with you and to help you find your way through this.

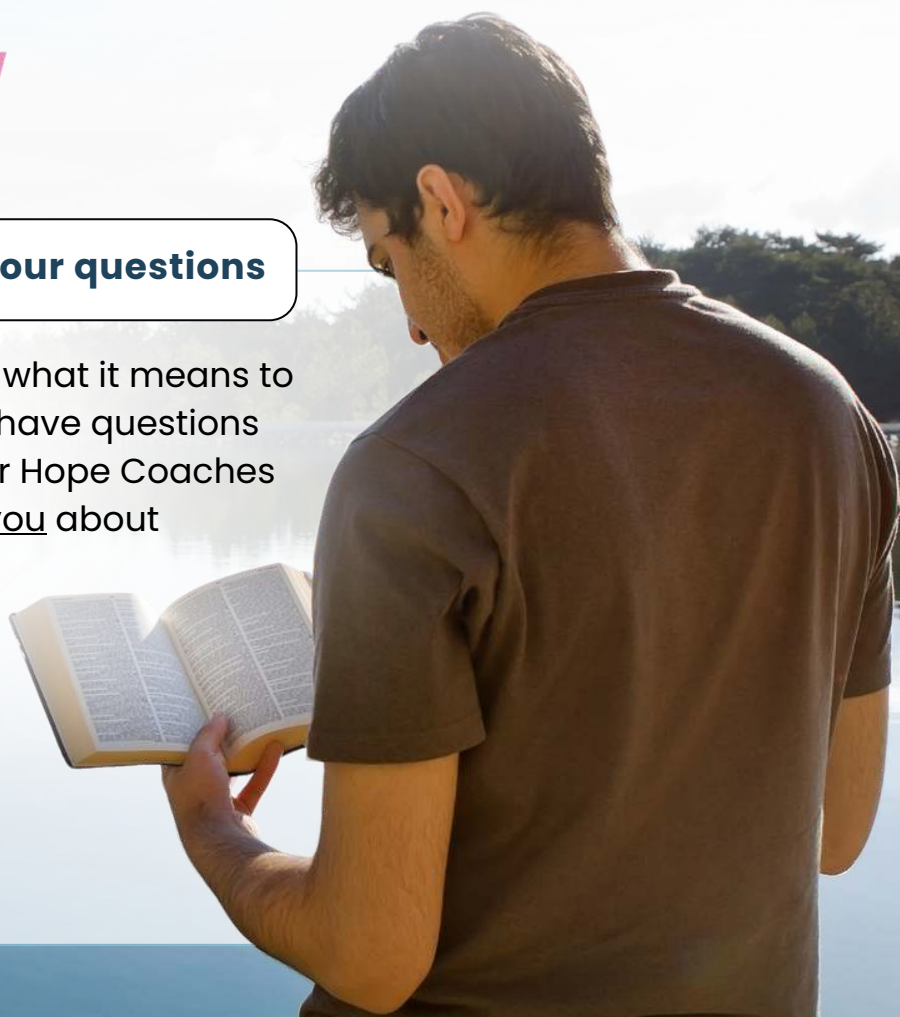


Talk with someone about your questions

If you want to know more about what it means to have a relationship with God or have questions about the topic of self-harm, our Hope Coaches are available 24/7 to chat with you about whatever is on your mind.



← **CHAT
LIVE WITH
A HOPE
COACH**



THE HOPE LINE

Our mission is to help students and young adults in crisis by offering sound advice and a safe place to connect. Through our online resources and the ability to chat live with a Hope Coach 24/7, we are here to help people make a true connection.

Founded by Dawson McAllister in 1991, TheHopeLine is a 100% donor funded ministry. If you would like to learn more about partnering with us, visit thehopeline.com/partners-in-hope.



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