

Autism & Self Harm

This factsheet is for:

- Neurodivergent adults
- Parents & Carers and
- Professionals



Summary:

Self-harm is the deliberate causing of injury to your own body, for a variety of reasons. It is often a desperate response to deep distress or anxiety. Autistic people can be prone to self-harm due to struggles to fit in and manage their feelings. You should always seek urgent help for self-harm.

More detail:

Self-harm is when someone intentionally injures their own body. They may do this as a way of responding to major distress or anxiety, or to punish themselves for something that they believe they are responsible for. Many people who self-harm intend, in some way, to take their own lives, though this is not always the case, and self-harm can also be a cry for help. If someone self-harms, it is vital to listen to them to establish the causes rather than making any assumptions.

As many autistic people find it hard to cope in a neurotypical world and can be prone to depression and anxiety, they are also more at risk of self-harm. Self-harm can also take place because autistic people may find it difficult to understand their own feelings, and so a struggle to explain them to others and get help when they need it. A bad bout of anxiety or depression can start a downward spiral in an autistic person from which they find it hard to see a way out. Self-harm can then feel like the only option for someone who just cannot cope.

If someone is at risk of self-harm, it is vital to identify potential events in their life that could cause particular stress or upset. Some of these may be obvious, such as a bereavement or major life change like a new job or home – many autistic people find change extremely difficult to cope with. Feeling isolated, as can happen to many autistic people because of their difficulty with social interactions, can also contribute to self-harm. Other triggers may be more specific to the individual and harder to identify without knowing them well. It is important to listen to autistic people at risk of self-harm to understand what causes them stress, even if these reasons are unexpected.

It is important to seek urgent professional medical help if self-harm is taking place, or if you feel compelled to hurt yourself. Always ensure that it is communicated clearly if the person needing treatment is autistic, and any particular needs they may have.

Treatment for self-harm will be as personal as the causes are to the individual concerned and can involve therapy, medication or a combination of both. There is plenty of support available – please use it if you or someone you know is self-harming.

