

“As a Parent, There is No Rulebook”: A New Resource for Parents and Carers of Young People who
Self-harm

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Self-harm is very common in young people, particularly adolescent girls. It is estimated that at least 10-15% of adolescents engage in self-harm.⁽¹⁾ This can have a considerable impact on the family and the young person's wider community. Finding out about a daughter or son's self-harm can be emotionally devastating. Other problems often develop, including increased stress levels within the family, financial difficulties and changes in lifestyle (e.g., having to travel to obtain psychiatric care). In some cases parents and family members may develop depression, anxiety and other mental health difficulties.^{2, (3)} The hidden nature of this behaviour and the stigma associated with it decreases the opportunity for parents to acquire information and social support which could aid coping.

Parents and carers of young people who self-harm often report that they are reluctant to seek help.³ Perceived isolation and a lack of social support can exacerbate the problems associated with a daughter or son's self-harming behaviour.² Parents have indicated that they would benefit from hearing about the experiences of other parents of children who self-harmed.⁽⁴⁾ In response, the Centre for Suicide Research at the University of Oxford, in collaboration with the University's Health Experiences Research Group, has developed a new resource for parents and carers in this situation.

We interviewed 39 parents and carers of young people aged up to 25 years who had self-harmed. Thirty of the young people were daughters, six were sons and one a husband. The age at which they had started self-harming ranged from nine to 21 years. The interviews were analysed to identify themes that were grouped into five main topic areas : 1) Why do young people self-harm?; 2) Finding out that a young person in your family is self-harming; 3) Living with self-harm; 4) Experiences of support and treatment; and 5) Looking ahead. The site contains video and audio clips as well as written transcripts from interviews with these parents.

We found that parents were deeply affected by a child's self-harm. Many parents described the impact of self-harm on their lives in vivid terms. The discovery of their child's self-harm could be a huge shock, often exacerbated by finding out from others (e.g. teachers, friends of the child or school nurses) that their child is unhappy. Parents may react to the news of their child's self-harming behaviour with feelings of powerlessness and lack of control. Amber told us, "As a parent, you're just not equipped. You don't know where to go or who to speak to – you blame yourself."

One response to these feelings of powerlessness is to exert control where possible. Amber, for example, hid knives and other sharp objects in the house. Judith found herself searching her daughter's room for sharp objects and reading her journal. Sally also felt she had to check up on her daughter: "I mean there were times I had to, unbeknown to her, check her diaries... check her phones [and find] phone numbers of friends so if she's missing, I can ring them." Later, however, dealing with their child's self-harming behaviour became almost routine, and many parents reported their emotions changing to annoyance or exasperation.

Experiences with clinical services varied. Jocelyn and Susanne found school nurses to be very helpful. Roberta felt cognitive behavioural therapy through CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) helped her daughter. "She said that really helped... and she now hasn't cut or burnt herself for over a year, which is really good." Georgia thought psychiatric help was invaluable for the parents as well. "[It's helpful] having this outlet where my husband and I can go and meet with the psychiatrist individually. We find it's really helpful, for us, I think we find it easier to support [our daughter]".

Some parents reported problems: Amber felt that there was not much help available after a crisis.

“My criticism is that once you're discharged from the crisis team, you then go back to your three-monthly or your six-monthly appointments with your psychiatrist. What's in the middle? And the answer is very little.” Several parents resorted to paying for private psychiatric help for their child, which placed an additional financial burden on the family. However, many parents reported positive experiences with psychiatrists and psychologists. “I felt I was included as much as I needed to be and I thought it was good... for my daughter to have an opportunity to talk to someone where she felt she could say what she liked and it wouldn't come back to me.” (Susanne).

Some parents avoided talking to other people about their child's self-harm, either out of respect for their child's privacy or because of the stigma they perceived to be associated with this behaviour. Flora said, “Unless someone has been through something like this they can't really understand.” Nancy felt the topic could not be discussed with people she knew. “There is nowhere you can discuss [self-harm]... I don't want other mums to know because I feel ashamed of what she's done and I feel responsible for it.”

Hearing the experiences of other people in the same situation can function as a source of information and a form of virtual support. The primary aim of the website can be summed up by Shannon, a mother interviewed for the project: “It's a small comfort for someone to know they're not the only ones. It has happened before and there's a light at the end of the tunnel.” On this new website parents can obtain information about ways of coping with a young person's self-harming behaviour as well as hearing the experiences of other parents in this situation. In addition, this resource will be useful as a training tool for clinicians and other workers who interact with young people who self-harm and their families.

This website is freely available and can be found at <http://www.healthtalk.org/peoples-experiences/mental-health/self-harm-parents-experiences/topics>

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Summary: A young person's self-harming behaviour can have a considerable impact on parents and other family members, including stress and anxiety, relationship problems, increased vulnerability to mental health problems and financial difficulties. However, many of those affected are reluctant to speak to others about this issue and may feel isolated. A new, freely available online resource developed by the Centre for Suicide Research and the Health Experiences Research Group at the University of Oxford includes information from interviews with 39 parents and carers about their experiences with their child's self-harm. Hearing the stories of other people who have been in the same situation can function as a source of information and a form of virtual support for parents, and the resource can also be used as a training tool for those who work with the families of young people who have self-harmed.