

Coping with difficult feelings

An information booklet about self-harm in older people:
for carers, loved ones & professionals



What we mean by self-harm

Self-harm is when somebody intentionally harms themselves. The behaviours that people often associate with the term self-harm include cutting, burning and poisoning. However, in many older people, self-harm can look quite different. As well as these more direct forms of self-injury, older people might engage in more indirect or 'subtle' forms of self-harm, such as:

- Misusing alcohol
- Not eating or drinking
- Not taking important medication
- Overdosing on medication
- Not attending medical appointments
- Self-isolation
- Not attending to self-care

We understand that the term 'self-harm' can mean different things to different people, and many associate it with younger people only. However, any person of any age can self-harm and if your loved one is engaging in any of these behaviours, **help is available.**

What you might notice if your loved one is self-harming

Some possible signs that your loved one might be harming themselves include:

- Lack of interest in life
- Being withdrawn or isolated
- Blaming themselves for problems or referring to themselves as useless
- Items that could be used to injure going missing
- Unexplained cuts or bruises

Rather than using direct language, older people might say things such as:

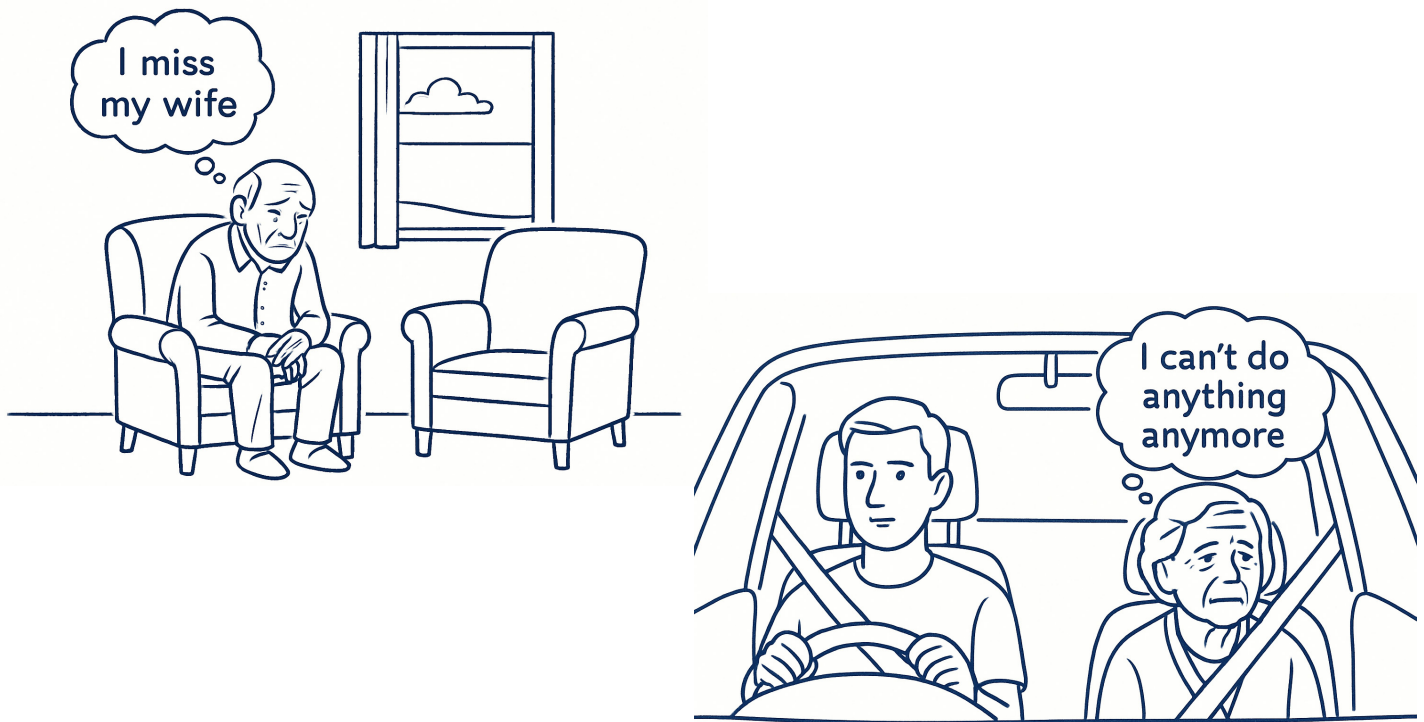
- "I feel gloomy"
- "I don't feel like going out"
- "I'm not hungry today"
- "My needs are not important"



Reasons why older people might have these difficulties

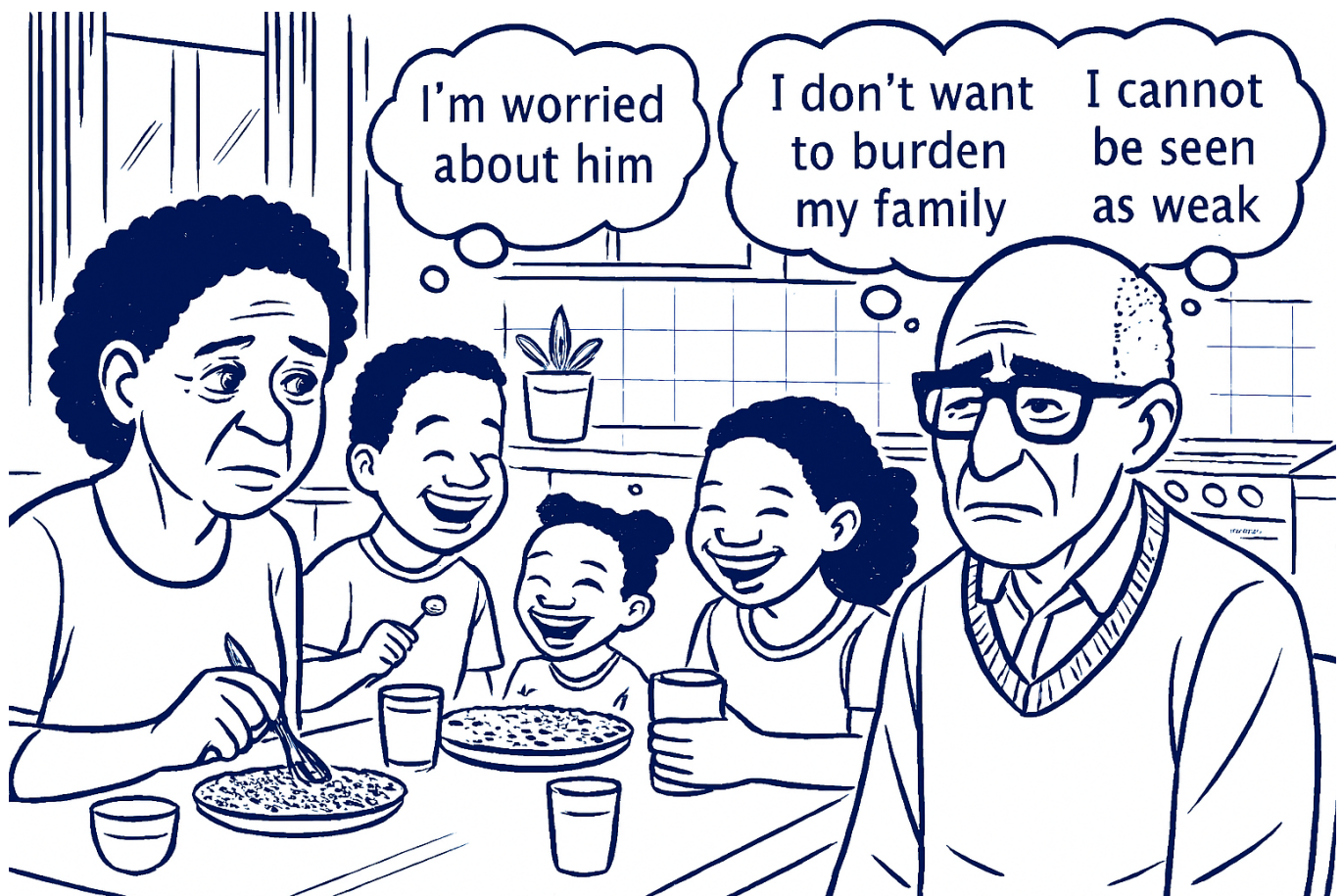
There are many reasons why somebody might self-harm, including to distract from or manage difficult feelings which can arise from painful memories, overwhelming situations or experiences. Most people who self-harm do not intend to end their life. However, older people who self-harm are at a higher risk of suicide and so it is important for them to access help. Support is available if your loved one is feeling suicidal:

<https://shininglightonsuicide.org.uk/feeling-suicidal/>



The following factors might contribute towards an older person feeling this way:

- Mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression.
- Illness and pain leading to feelings of hopelessness and despair.
- Social isolation and loneliness.
- Worries about financial security.
- A belief that talking about feelings is 'weak'. People might feel shame or stigma so choose to cope in other ways.
- Being less able and needing to accept help from others.
- Changes to role and self-identity, for example, in family or community, can have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.
- Experiences of grief and bereavement.



Reasons why it can be hard to share these difficulties with others

It can be difficult for older people to express how they are truly feeling to other people for reasons such as:

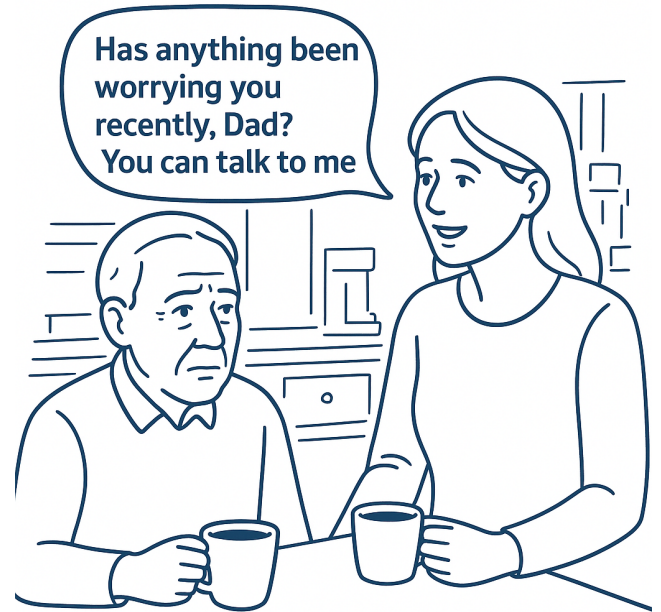
- Feeling like a burden
- Fear of how others will respond
- Stigma around mental health
- Impact of cultural beliefs surrounding mental health
- Lack of trust in healthcare professionals
- Not knowing how to describe the difficulties
- Wanting to remain independent
- Assumptions that it is normal to feel the way they do
- Not being aware of people to talk to
- Feeling tired of repeating their story

If you have noticed your loved one has not been themselves recently, they may be worried about some of the things listed above. See page 5 for how to open up this type of conversation.

Opening up the conversation

It is okay to ask!

Understandably, you may feel concerned that asking your loved one about difficulties such as self-harm might make things worse or make them more likely to act. However, research suggests that asking directly about self-harm (or related difficulties such as suicide) does not make somebody more likely to do it. Instead, it can give the person who is struggling permission to talk about what is going on for them so that support can then be put in place.



How to ask your loved one about self-harm

- Ask how they have been feeling and if anything has been worrying them.
- If you have noticed something specific, ask curiously about this in a gentle, non-blaming way.
- Let them know you are there to listen to them and will not judge what they say or do.
- Remind them that you care for them and want to do what you can to help.
- If they are responsive to what you are saying, ask how they might feel about talking to their GP or other professional about how they are feeling so they can access help to feel better.
- Validate their experiences and let them know that they will not be alone in how they are feeling.

Guidance for professionals

NICE guidance

NICE guidelines suggest that all people 65 and over who self-harm should be assessed by mental health professionals experienced in the assessment of older people who self-harm. Assessment should follow the same principles as for working-age adults. In addition:

- Pay particular attention to the presence of depression, cognitive impairment or physical ill health
- Include a full assessment of the person's social and home situation, including any role they have as a carer
- Take into account the higher risks of suicide in older people who self-harm.

Understanding the function of self-harm and how it can be maintained

Self-harm can be a way of coping with upsetting thoughts, feelings or experiences. As discussed above, these can arise under many circumstances.

Whilst self-harming might introduce a temporary feeling of relief from those upsetting thoughts, this is often quickly replaced by feelings of guilt and shame, leading to more upsetting thoughts, and a cycle is formed that can be hard to break.

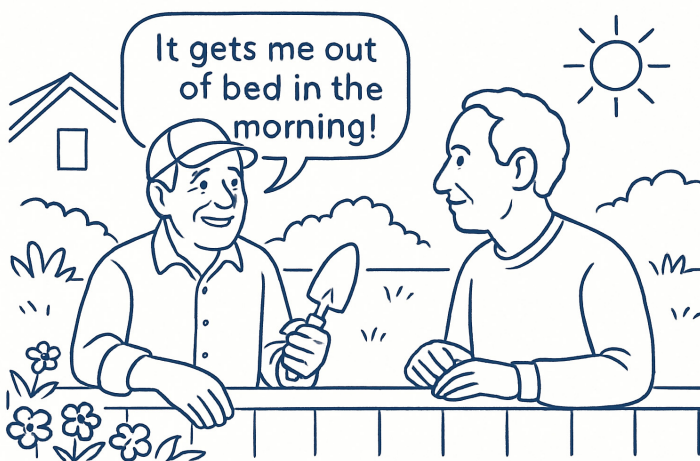
It can be helpful to support older people to develop alternative ways of coping with their thoughts and feelings. For example, writing their worries down or talking to somebody who will not judge them.



Other ways to help

Alongside talking to a professional, there may be ways you can help your loved one to cope with their feelings, such as distraction, stress management techniques or self-care activities. Below is a list of things you could try:

- Helping them to find their purpose - something that motivates them to get out of bed in the morning.
- Encouraging them to join a group or connect socially with people who make them feel good (e.g. call an old friend).
- Encouraging them to write their feelings down in a diary.
- Going for a short walk or opening a window for them to get some fresh air each day.
- Encouraging them to connect with their faith or spirituality.
- Practicing gratitude by focusing more on or listing the good things or experiences in your life.



Looking after yourself

In order to be there for your loved one, you need to take care of yourself too. This can be difficult when you feel confused, worried or upset. It is important that you have somebody you can talk to too as holding in your own feelings is likely to make things worse for both you and your loved one. It is also important for you to take breaks and do things to help you feel good. The five ways of wellbeing might be helpful to consider.

The five ways of wellbeing encourage us to:

- **Connect**
- **Get active**
- **Take notice**
- **Learn**
- **Give**

...in order to improve our mental health and wellbeing.

Practicing mindfulness by paying more attention to the present moment rather than worrying about past or future might also help to reduce worries you or your loved one have: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/

Support available for you and your loved one

NHS Talking Therapies

Talking therapies are effective and confidential treatments delivered by trained NHS professionals. They can help if your loved one is struggling with difficulties such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder, amongst others. We know that many older people benefit greatly from accessing this service. Your loved one could refer themselves directly to their local NHS talking therapies service or their GP could make a referral on their behalf. Support is free and available in person, by video or over the phone. **If you are struggling, you can refer yourself to talking therapies for psychological support too.**

Website: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies/>

Support services that you or your loved one may find helpful:

Age UK

Support and advice for older people on general topics or worries such as benefits or care home advice.

Telephone: **0800 678 1602**
(England – open 8am-7pm every day)

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk

Silverline (run by Age UK)

Advice, conversation and support for people aged 55 and over struggling with feelings of isolation, worry or loneliness.

Telephone befriending service:
0800 470 8090 (available 24/7)

Website: www.thesilverline.org.uk

Re-engage

Support for people aged 75 and over who are socially isolated or lonely. Offer a free telephone befriending service and local activity groups to connect. Also offer a rainbow call compassion service for older LGBTQ+ people who are isolated or lonely.

Telephone: **0800 716 543**

Website: www.reengage.org.uk

Qwell

Free and anonymous digital mental wellbeing support for adults. Offer professional support with no referral needed, peer support to allow people to discuss issues together and self-help tools to create journals, track mood and set goals.

Website: <https://www.qwell.io>

Samaritans

Free helpline for anybody of any age who needs help, including carers.

Telephone: **116 123** (available 24/7)

Website: www.samaritans.org

Self-injury support

Support for those who self-harm at any age.

Telephone: **0808 800 8088**

(7pm-10pm Mon-Thurs)

Website: www.selfinjurysupport.org.uk

Mind

Support line for anybody of any age who needs support and an infoline to direct people to local services. Website contains resources including for self-harm and suicide.

Telephone: **0300 102 1234** (helpline open 9am-6pm Mon-Fri); **0300 123 3393** (Infoline)

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk>

Greater Manchester Bereavement Service

Find support for anyone in Greater Manchester who has been bereaved or affected by a death, no matter the cause, no matter how long ago.

Telephone: **0161 983 0902**
(available 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Email: gmicb-sal.gm.bs@nhs.net

Website: <https://greater-manchester-bereavement-service.org.uk>

Dementia UK

A specialist dementia nursing charity that can offer support and advice for anybody affected by dementia.

Telephone: **0800 888 6678** (helpline for free expert advice).

Email: helpline@dementiauk.org

Website: www.dementiauk.org

You may find additional support services available for your loved one in our other booklet aimed at the person who is self-harming, which can be found on the Shining a Light on Suicide website.

Support specifically for carers

The above services may also be helpful for you if you are a carer or loved one who is struggling with your own thoughts or feelings, about this or something else. There are also carer-specific support services such as those below who provide support, advice and resources for unpaid carers:

Carers Trust

Website: <https://carers.org>

Carers UK

Website: <https://www.carersuk.org>

You may be able to find other, local services by searching online.

Other information or resources

Directory of all community groups across Greater Manchester

<https://manchestercommunitycentral.org/directory>

Community crisis spaces across Greater Manchester

<http://tinyurl.com/crisis-community-services-GM>

Greater Manchester Older People's Network

<https://www.gmopn.org.uk>

Shining a Light on Suicide

This website contains useful resources for self-harm and suicide, including a safety plan:

<https://shiningalightonsuicide.org.uk>

What to do in a crisis

If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis, please call NHS 111 and select option 2 for 24/7 access to crisis mental health support.

If there is an immediate risk of danger to life, call 999 or attend A&E.

Part of Greater Manchester
Integrated Care Partnership



This publication has been brought together between partners of the Greater Manchester Integrated Care Partnership, including NHS Greater Manchester, Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust and the lived experience expertise from the Greater Manchester Older Peoples Network and Mature Minds Matter.

The images used in this resource were created using generative AI.