

Coping with difficult feelings

An information booklet about self-harm in older people



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 may 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 you are engaging in any of these behaviours, **you are not alone, and help is available.**

What an older person might say

If you are an older person struggling with how you feel, you might be likely to use the following phrases to describe how you are feeling:

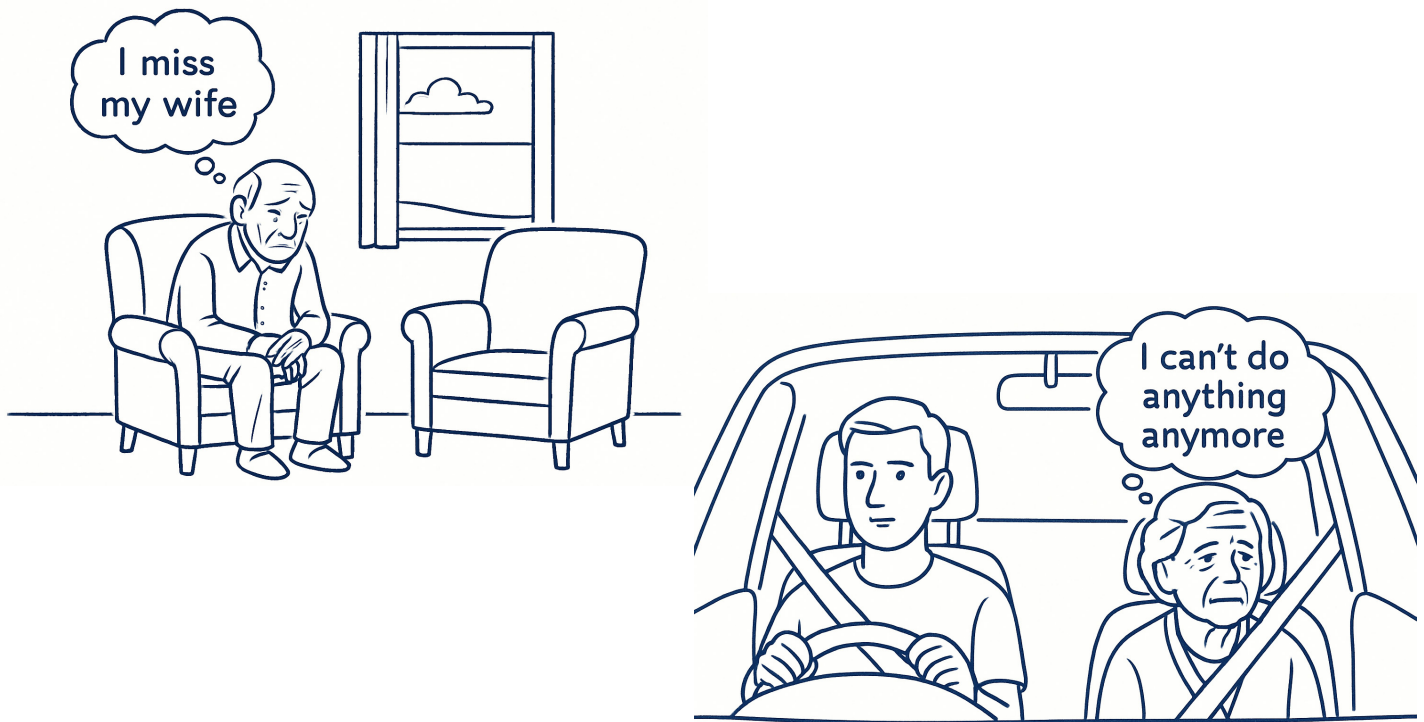
- "I am having a low day today"
- "I feel gloomy"
- "I don't feel like going out"
- "I'm not hungry today"
- "I should let somebody else have that appointment, my needs are not important"



Reasons why older people might have these difficulties

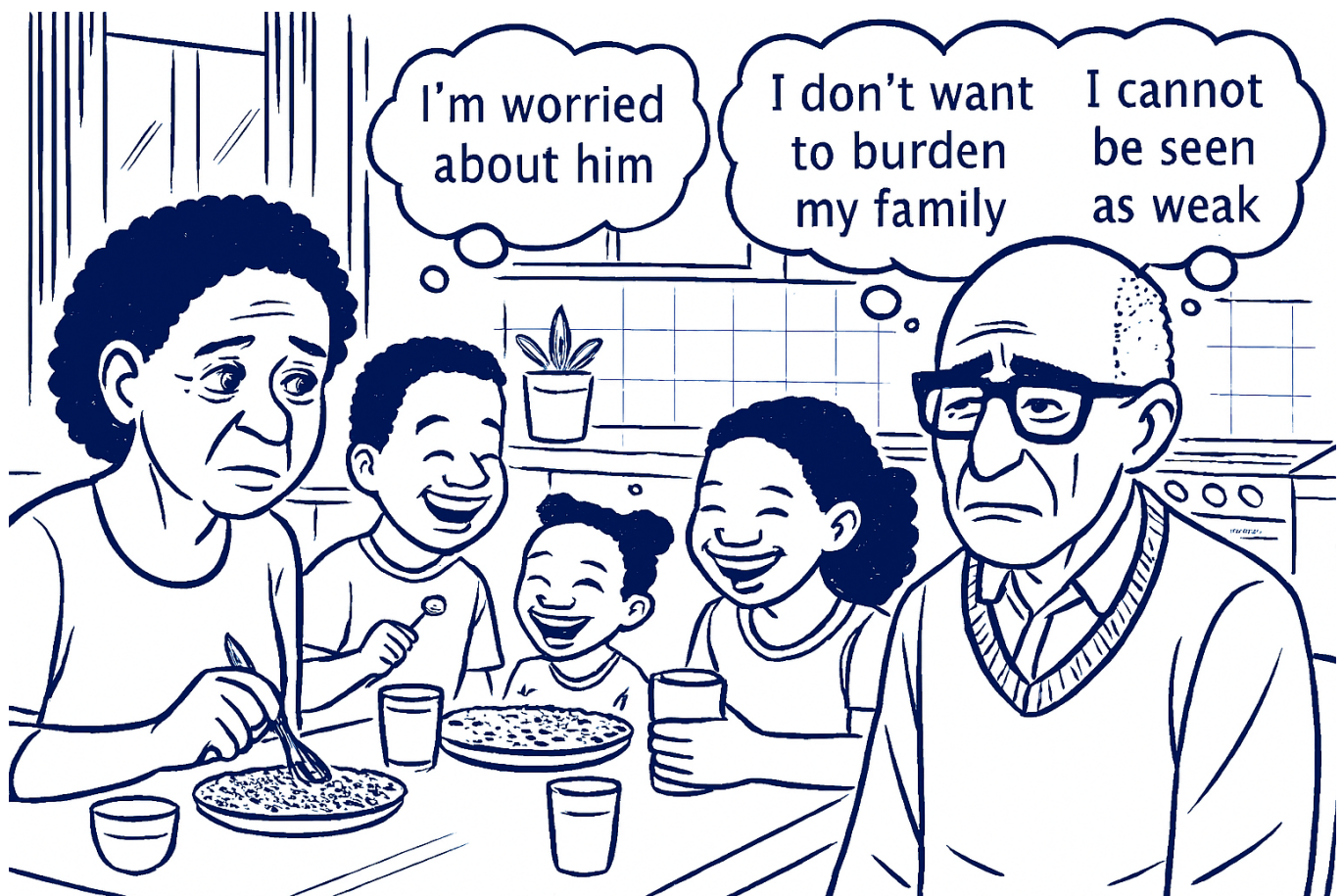
There are many reasons why somebody might self-harm, including to distract from, or manage, difficult feelings which can arise from painful memories, overwhelming situations or experiences. Most people who self-harm do not intend to end their life. However, self-harm is a risk factor for suicide. Deep feelings of distress can lead to thoughts of not wanting to be here anymore. Support is available if you are feeling this way:

<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 really difficult to express how we are truly feeling to other people, especially if that person has no idea or we are not used to openly sharing information about ourselves with others. Reasons why it can be difficult for older people to talk to somebody might include:

- 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 this way
- Not being aware of people to talk to
- Feeling tired of repeating their story

How to share

Talk to somebody you can trust

The people in your life who care about you would want to know if you are struggling so they can support you. Describe what is going on for you in whichever way makes most sense to you. If it feels easier, you could write it down and share it with them, or you could share this booklet with them so you do not have to explain everything yourself.

Talk to your GP

GPs are trained professionals who will understand the difficulties you are experiencing and not judge you for them. If you feel able, book an appointment to discuss your feelings. Explain to the GP the feelings you are having or what behaviours this is leading to. It can be helpful to write down important parts you want to say before the appointment and take this with you. They will likely ask you some questions and think together with you about what might be helpful.

If you are using more direct methods of self-harm, professionals can help you to gradually reduce this or find other ways to manage. They will support you if you require more urgent help and work to help you stay safe. Seeking professional help is nothing to be worried about.

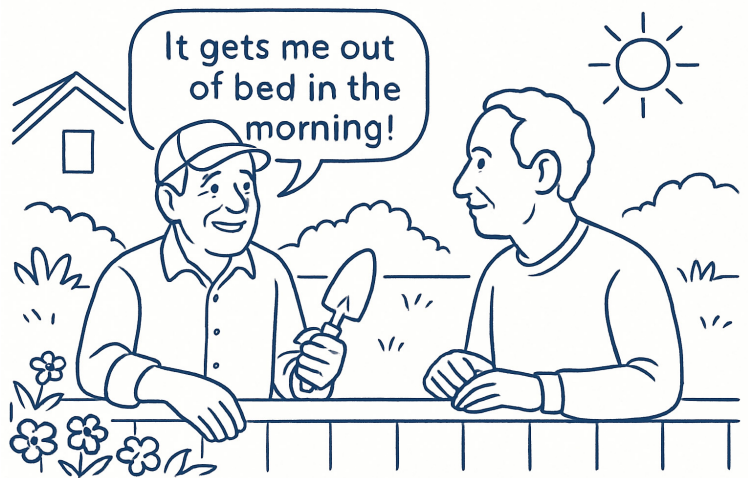
See pages 7-9 for more support avenues



Other ways to help

Alongside talking or if you are waiting to talk to a professional, it can be helpful to think of other ways to manage your feelings, such as distraction, stress management techniques or self-care activities. Below is a list of things you could try to help you, if you feel able:

- Joining a group you are interested in or would enjoy.
- Connecting socially with people who make you feel good (e.g. call an old friend or meet for coffee).
- Writing your feelings down in a diary or express your feelings through art or poetry.
- Finding your purpose – something that motivates you to get out of bed in the morning.
- Helping others by volunteering (e.g. telephone befriending).
- Connecting with your faith or spirituality.
- Practicing gratitude by focusing more on or listing the good things or experiences in your life.
- Stroking or caring for a pet.
- Sharing a skill or learning a new skill.
- Practicing mindfulness by paying more attention to the present moment rather than worrying about past or future: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/>
- Listening to music you used to enjoy or that you find soothing.
- Reading a good book or watching an engaging film.
- Going for a short walk or opening a window to get some fresh air each day.
- Preparing what meals you are going to make or eat in advance to take the pressure off deciding each day.
- Use of reminders to help with taking medication or eating or drinking.



The five ways of wellbeing encourage us to:

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

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

Support services available

Aside from talking to your GP or somebody you trust about how you are feeling, the following services might be helpful:

NHS Talking Therapies

Talking therapies are effective and confidential treatments delivered by trained NHS professionals. They can help if you are 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. You can refer yourself directly to your local NHS talking therapies service or your GP can make a referral on your behalf. Support is free and available in person, by video or over the phone.

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

Support services for older people

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

Hourglass

A charity focused on ending the harm, abuse and neglect of older people. They offer a free 24/7 helpline for older people suffering from any type of abuse or neglect.

Telephone: **0808 808 8141**

Website: www.wearehourglass.org

Silver Line (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

Royal Voluntary Service

Offer a free telephone befriending service and a free online activity hub to help people stay mentally and physically active, socially connected and having fun.

Calls with Care befriending line:
0800 011 3407

Website: www.virtualvillagehall.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk

Support for people of all ages

Samaritans

Free helpline for anybody of any age who needs help.

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

Website: www.samaritans.org

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>

LGBT Foundation

A national charity who provide services and activities that give a lifeline to LGBTQ+ people in need, offering hope and support.

Telephone: **0345 330 3030**

Website: <https://lgbt.foundation>

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

Greater Manchester Bereavement Service

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>

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>

Grassroots suicide prevention 'stay alive' mobile app

A suicide prevention app designed to help people stay safe in crisis. It contains a safety plan, a page to store important photos and memories and a 'find help now' page with resources and urgent support options in your local area. This is not a crisis service.

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.