

# Alternatives to self-harm

*Some of these ideas will feel like a perfect fit, whilst others will seem ridiculous to you, it's just about seeing what works for YOU, we're all different. These ideas have all been suggested by people who've self-harmed in the past, so they worked for someone!*

## Ideas that simulate self-harm

These are ideas that give some of the visual or physical sensation of self-harm without actually causing harm to the body.

- Ping an elastic band or hair band on your wrist (but not too hard)
- Draw red lines on your skin
- Clench an ice cube in your hand
- Write on your skin
- Finger paint using red paint
- On a photo or drawing of yourself, mark in red where you want to hurt yourself
- Plunge your face into a sink full of freezing cold water for a few seconds

## Ideas for when you need to vent your feelings

Sometimes our feelings become too much for us to bear and the only way we can think of managing them is to hurt ourselves. Here are some alternatives that will help you vent anger, frustration or other extreme feelings.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| • Go somewhere quiet and scream   | • Play music loudly   |
| • Punch a punch bag   | • Bang drums or other percussion instruments  |
| • Make a ball out of play dough and smash it  | • Run up hill   |
| • Hurl lumps of ice at the ground and watch them smash                                    | • Write a letter to the person who has made you angry, venting your frustration (but don't send it) |
| • Smash a watermelon  | • Cry   |
| • Hammer nails into wood  | • Cut up an old piece of material   |
| • Play squash   | • Tear up cardboard   |
| • Tear up a magazine  | • Have a pillow fight with a wall   |
| • Write down what made you feel angry and scribble it out until the paper is worn through | • Stamp your feet   |
| • Dance like nobody is watching   | • Snap sticks in half   |
|   | • Sing very loudly  |

## **Ideas for when you feel alone or down**

These are ideas which will help when your mood is low. When you feel alone or deeply sad and you don't know why.

- Look at photographs of your friends and family
- Think of your favourite day ever
- Tell someone about your favourite day ever
- Talk to someone you trust
- Call a helpline or use an online forum
- Listen to soothing music
- Take a walk in the garden, notice each tree and flower and try to learn their names
- Walk your dog
- Go to the park and swing, listen to the laughter of children and let it infect you
- Reread your favourite childhood book
- Watch silly videos of cats on YouTube
- Listen to a 'feel good' playlist of songs to lift your mood

## **Ideas for when you need a distraction**

Sometimes the need to self-harm is less intense but it doesn't go away that fast and you need something to take your mind off it for a little longer. These ideas might help. If you regularly self-harm at the same time each day, you might also find that these are good activities to do at that time, to see if you can avoid your regular self-harm session.

- Watch something light-hearted on TV
- Go for a walk
- Call your best friend for a chat
- Have a shower
- Do a jigsaw
- Find something beginning with every letter of the alphabet
- Write a letter or an email
- Read a book
- Sleep
- Learn the words to a new song
- Practice a musical instrument
- Curl up on a bean bag and watch the world go by
- Play a computer game
- Juggle
- Practice a new skill (e.g. speaking a language, juggling)
- Bake
- Sew or knit
- Build a card house or line of cards then knock it down
- Look for pictures in the clouds
- Do some cleaning
- Work in the garden, dead-head some flowers or do some weeding
- Fly a kite
- Watch out for birds and try to identify the different types
- Skim stones – how many bounces can you do?
- Dig for worms
- Write a blog post

## **Delaying tactics to give you a short time to think**

When you're trying hard to give up self-harming, sometimes you know that if you can just give yourself a little time to think then you'll be able to reason with yourself. These ideas will buy you a minute or two to try and calm your anxiety and remind yourself of safer coping mechanisms (you might do one of these before going on to try one of the ideas in another category).

- Set a timer on your phone for 60 seconds and watch it tick down before you do anything
- Recite the alphabet forwards and then backwards
- Practise your times tables
- Take the item you intend to harm with and wrap it up in towels, blankets or newspaper
- Count to 100
- Sing 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'
- Run up and down stairs three times

## **Ideas to help you feel more in control**

If everything feels out of control and your urge to self-harm is because you feel like you need control something, try one of these ideas instead:

- Put your books in height, alphabetical or colour order
- Plan your diary for the next week, build in rest or fun breaks
- Build something intricate like an airfix or lego model
- Paint by numbers
- Read a kids' 'choose your own adventure' book making all the 'wrong' choices
- Make bread from scratch
- Give your bedroom a facelift by shifting the furniture around
- Give your room a deep clean

## **Ideas that remind you that you have a future**

The future can feel like an unreal prospect at times and all we can think of is the desperate thoughts and feelings we're experiencing now. Sometimes, casting our minds forwards can be a helpful way to enable ourselves to find our way out of the emotional difficulties we're facing in the here and now.

- Plan your ultimate 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party
- If you have exams coming up, think about how you'll feel after the last one
- Imagine who you'll be friends with when you're thirty
- Plan the speech you'll give at your 100<sup>th</sup> birthday
- Think about the 3 things you most hope to achieve in life
- Write your bucket list

## **Ideas for when you're confused**

Sometimes our thoughts get all muddled and we don't know what to think. These are ideas that can help us to start thinking a little more straight and begin to understand ourselves and what is going on around us.

- Write a poem called 'I don't understand'
- Paint a big, abstract, picture using poster paints
- Write a list of questions you wish you knew the answer to (you could share them with someone later)
- Stop and work backwards through the last hour trying to answer the question 'what made me feel this way?'
- Ask yourself what would the blade / flame etc say to me if it could talk?
- Express yourself through music, art or words
- Trace each of your scars with your finger and remember the story it tells

## **Ideas that nurture rather than harm**

Sometimes, doing something which involves caring for something or someone else can be the perfect antidote to feelings of self-harm.

- Water the garden
- Feed or brush a pet
- Play with a sibling
- Sing to a baby
- Write a message to say thank you to a friend or family member for something kind they have done
- Plan what you will buy your family for Christmas
- Massage the part of our body that you feel the urge to harm
- Look after your older wounds or scars, clean them and dress them
- Ask someone you care about for a hug
- Smooth body lotion into the places you want to harm
- Rub bio-oil into your old scars
- Put on your cosiest, biggest jumper and give yourself a hug

## Ideas that remind you that you're real

On some occasions, the chief reason that we feel the need to self-harm is just to remind ourselves that we're real, to prevent the feeling of numbness from overtaking us. If that's how you're feeling, these ideas might help:

- Google yourself
- Read your last school report
- Paint your finger and toe nails
- Have a cold shower
- Ask someone to give you a massage
- Punch a cushion
- Plunge your hands into a bowl of ice water
- Eat an ice lolly, focus on how the cold feels on your tongue
- Eat spicy food
- Have a water fight with a friend or sibling
- Smell different spices and really focus on the smell
- Try to remember every birthday cake you've ever had
- Read old blog posts or diary entries
- Read your first school report and remember yourself as a five year old

## Ideas that won't be noticed in busy situations

When the urge to self-harm overcomes you in the middle of a crowded situation or in a lesson, it can be hard to know what to do to manage how you're feeling. Here are a few ideas that nobody will even know you're doing:

- Scream silently in your head
- Imagine yourself in your favourite place with your favourite people
- Become aware of every part of your body in turn, think about your toes, then your ankles then your knees etc
- Breathe deeply and slowly, counting to five with each inhalation and each exhalation
- Recite a fact about each other person in the room in your head
- If you're amongst strangers, pick one and imagine what they did last Friday
- Put your hands in your pockets and pinch your thighs

## Remember...

Every time you feel the urge to self-harm and you manage to use an alternative strategy is a BIG success worth celebrating. Even if you self-harmed at other times in the same day, focus on the time you succeeded and think about how you might be able to replicate that success.

**Good Luck!**