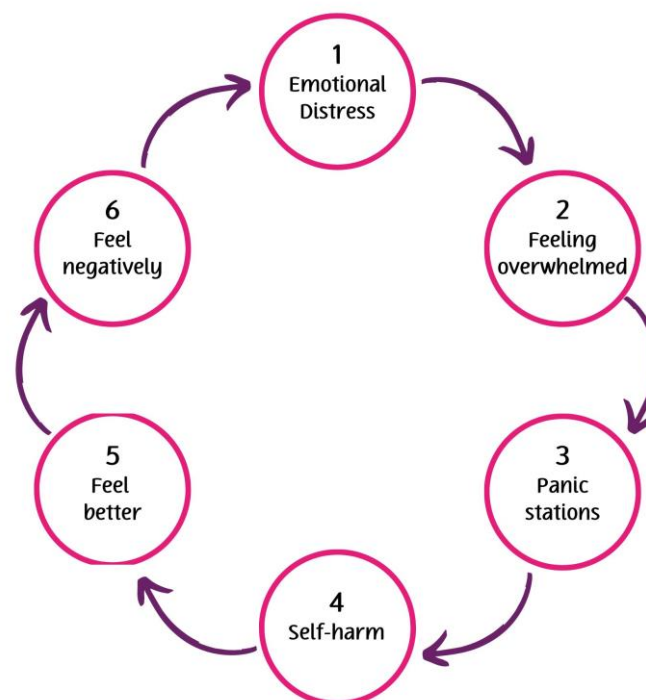


Cycle of Self-Harm

Self-harm is a coping strategy that is used help people deal with distressing thoughts and emotions. Self-harm can bring release from overwhelming emotions and can allow a person to feel present and connected to reality again. However, the release of these overwhelming emotions is often only temporary, and the act of self-harm can lead to feelings of guilt, anger, frustration and shame. These negative emotions can then cause the original overwhelming emotions to resurface, which can lead to further self-harm. This is commonly known as the cycle of self-harm. Below is a diagram of the cycle of self-harm with descriptions of each stage in the cycle.



- 1. Emotional Distress:** This is when a person starts to feel emotionally distressed. The distress could come from remembering distressing or traumatic events, or could be from negative feelings that they have about themselves. They could also be feeling numb or disconnected from reality. Often these feelings can be confusing, and the person might not be able to pinpoint where the feelings are coming from, or why they feel this way.
- 2. Feeling overwhelmed:** The distressing emotions that the person is feeling become overwhelming. They can feel that their emotions are trapped inside with no way to release them.
- 3. Panic stations:** The distressing emotions reach the point where the person feels they aren't able to control them. They feel the urge to self-harm.
- 4. Self-harm:** The person self-harms. The emotional distress is reduced and the person feels more in control. Self-harm is a coping strategy and for each person the self-harm will hold a specific function. As everyone is different, the function of the self-harm could be different from person to person. For more information on the functions of self-harm, [click here](#).
- 5. Feel better:** The person has managed to bring their emotional distress to a level that they can manage. However, this feeling is only temporary. A person could stay at this point for days, weeks or months, or they might only stay in this position for a few hours.
- 6. Feeling negatively:** The person begins to feel negatively about harming themselves. They can feel guilt, shame, numbness or anger at themselves for having self-harmed. These negative emotions lead back to point A and the cycle continues.

The best time to have a conversation about self-harm is when the person is at point 5. The person will be calmer and will feel more emotionally balanced. Once the person has started the cycle again, it can be very difficult for them to break it. Self-harm is a coping strategy and, when a person is in extreme emotional distress, sometimes self-harm feels like their only option. If we try and stop them at point 2, 3 or 4, we are essentially taking away their coping strategy. This could cause the person to harm themselves in other ways that may be less familiar to them, which could be more dangerous. It could also lead to distrust between you and the person, which could lead to them being more secretive.

Cycle adapted from the Sutton, J. (2007). Healing the Hurt Within: Understand Self-injury and Self-harm, and Heal the Emotional Wounds. 3Rev Ed edition. Oxford: How To Books p.187