



Safer Alternatives to Self-Harm

Self-harm, or Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI), refers to deliberately harming yourself without necessarily intending to take your life. It's often a way of trying to cope with overwhelming emotions or experiences.

If you're having these urges, you're not alone - and there are safer ways to get through those moments.

This resource offers a (4 R's) framework for staying safe while meeting key needs, without judgement. You don't have to follow the steps perfectly or in order - just try one small step at a time.



- 1. Reflect:** "What do I need?"
- 2. Respond:** Meet the need safely
- 3. Ride it out:** The urge will pass
- 4. Reach out:** Get support

1. Reflect on your urge to self-harm:

What need might this urge be trying to meet? (e.g. see provided suggestions). This can be easier to explore in advance, when you feel less overwhelmed.

If it's hard to identify your need right now, you can skip to Step 2 and try out a safe alternative.

...or skip to the end for quick tips for right now...

2. Respond to your need in a safe way:

This resource includes suggestions for safer alternatives to self-harm. You may find different strategies work at different times - experiment and notice what helps.

See safer alternatives on the next page

It can also help to discuss these strategies with a mental health professional, and explore your needs more deeply over time.



3. Ride out the urge to self-harm:

Urges rise and fall like waves - they will pass, even if they feel intense, even if it doesn't feel like it right now.

See if you can delay acting on the urge. Try this:

- Set a 10-minute timer
- Choose one safe alternative (e.g. from this resource)
- Gently remind yourself (e.g. "this feeling will pass")

If the urge stays, reset the timer and try something else.

"This feeling will pass"



4. Reach out for support:

Asking for help is important, but it can feel hard. You might start by reaching out to someone safe and saying: "I'm having a hard time and could use someone to talk to - are you free?".

It can also really help to talk to a professional about self-harm, such as your GP, a registered mental health professional, helpline (findahelpline.com), or your local mental health crisis team.

Examples of Safer Alternatives to Self-harm

(Based on self-harm theories, e.g. 8 C's of Self-injury; Apex model).

Different urges are often linked to different needs. The goal is not to judge your need, but to recognise it and meet it safely. You might notice one or more of these:



“What need is this urge trying to meet?”

It's about the intensity...

I want to feel something, to feel alive: exercise, dance to loud music, spicy food, shout into a pillow, hold ice cube.

I want to feel less overwhelmed or shut things out: low-demand distracting activities, e.g. watching TV or playing a simple game.

It's about my social needs...

I want to communicate distress: what is a safer way to express your needs? Is there someone who could help advocate for you?

I want to feel part of a peer group: consider ways to share positive experiences, or opportunities for new connections.

It's about the outcome...

I feel I need to punish myself or be hard on myself: do a difficult or boring task, or a short burst of intense exercise.

I want to cleanse guilt/shame: shower/bath, safe spiritual ritual.

It's about emotions...

I want to feel in control: breathing exercise, actively guide self-talk (e.g. shift from self-critique to self-compassion), or small structured choices (e.g. organising, plan your next hour).

I want to feel calm/happy: exercise/dance (endorphins), listen to or create music (dopamine), connect with people (oxytocin), being in nature (serotonin).

It's okay if nothing works right away - keep trying small steps. Urges can come and go, and each moment is a chance to try something different.

If the urge to self-harm feels strong right now:

- Move away from anything you could use to hurt yourself
- Change your environment (go outside or be near others)
- Remind yourself: this urge will pass
- Run cold water on your hands or hold ice
- Set a 10-minute timer and try one strategy
- Reach out to someone

If you're thinking about **acting on suicidal thoughts**, seek immediate support from a safe person near you and/or call your local mental health crisis team or emergency services. When things feel overwhelming, try to focus on getting through the next few minutes and keeping yourself safe.

My Plan

My Warning Signs

My Go-To Strategies

People I Can Contact

Professional Supports



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