

**Why is understanding self-harm
behaviours in young people
important to suicide prevention?**

This session will introduce you to:

- **‘self-harm’** and how it is different to **‘suicide’**
- understanding what are the drivers of self-harm
- how to engage with a young person who is self harming
- where to find further useful information for schools policies

Discuss with the person next to you or in small groups (2m)

- What concerns do you have about young peoples self-harm from your experience in schools or in other YP settings?**

(How common is it? Do you feel confident about how to engage / support a young person who is self-harming in your school or setting?)

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) states that:

‘self-harm is defined as intentional self-poisoning or self-injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose’

How is self-harm different to suicide?

Suicide is when an individual acts to end their own life voluntarily and intentionally. It’s different to self-harm – which is often a way of trying to **cope** with distressing emotions and experiences

Most young people engaging in self-harm do not want to end their life - but **self-harm is a risk factor for suicide and a sign of distress**

Signs that young people may be engaging in self-harm

- unexplained cuts, burns or bruises
- keeping themselves covered inappropriately (eg long sleeves on a hot day)
- avoiding swimming or changing clothes around others

Signs of self-harm may be similar to signs of physical or other abuse -it can be hard to know who inflicted the injury so it is important that staff are curious when asking children about an injury..

Young people self harm for a variety of reasons, these can include:

- To relieve tension
- To feel in control
- As a form of punishing themselves
- To feel more connected and alive, (when they may be feeling emotionally numb or detached)
- As a way of communicating distress
- It can provide distraction from stressful thoughts or current situations
- As an opportunity to elicit nurture and comfort
- As a coping strategy

**Some experiences or vulnerabilities
which may increase risk of self-harm:**

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences** (ACE's – eg see: [Harvard ACEs](#))
- **Bereavement** (especially bereavement by suicide)
- **School / academic pressures**
- **Alcohol or substance / drug misuse**
- **Identity issues**
- **Mental health difficulties**
- **Neurodiversity** (and feeling isolated or 'different') **or Learning Disabilities**
- **Children in Care or Looked After Children**
- **Low self-esteem**
- **Bullying in childhood** including cyberbullying (especially for individuals who are, or perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ+))

Situations that might trigger an episode of self-harm or suicide in young people include:

- difficulties at home
- arguments / problems with friends or break-up of intimate relationships
- school pressures
- bullying / cyberbullying
- transitions and changes, such as changing schools
- difficult anniversaries
- increased risk in the presence of alcohol or substance use

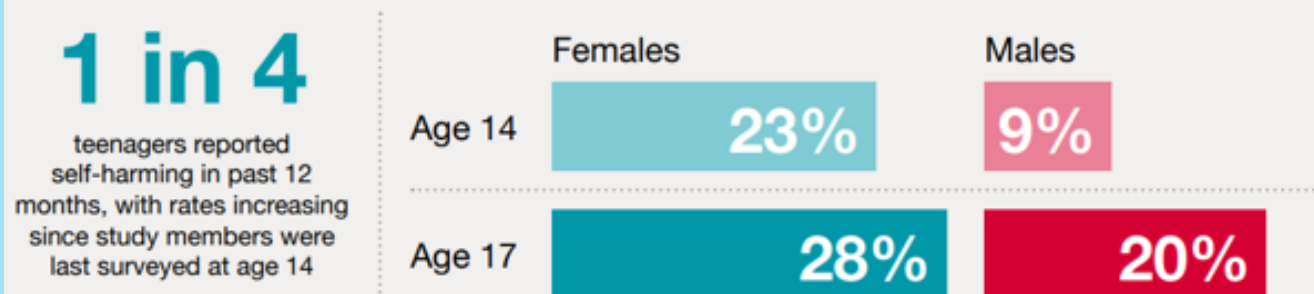
- Approximately half of all people who die by suicide have previously self-harmed
- Within the UK, 15–20% of those who die by suicide have visited a hospital for self-harm in the year prior to their death
- Around one in four young people who present to hospital with self-harm will repeat. This group is **approximately thirty times more likely to die by suicide in the 12 months after their hospital presentation** compared with their same aged peers
(males, older adolescents, those using self-injury, and those attending hospital more than once particularly at risk of death by suicide - Hawton 2020)

Self-harm presentations (especially repeat self-harm) therefore represent an important opportunity for suicide prevention

Teenage years a high-risk period

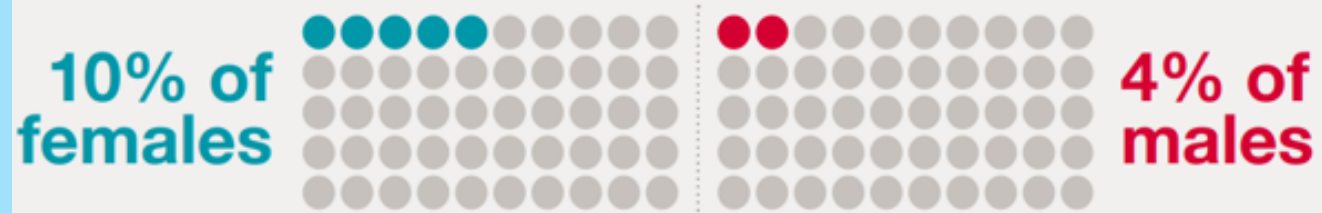


Increase in prevalence of self-harming between ages 14 and 17



Prevalence of attempted suicide

By age 17, approximately



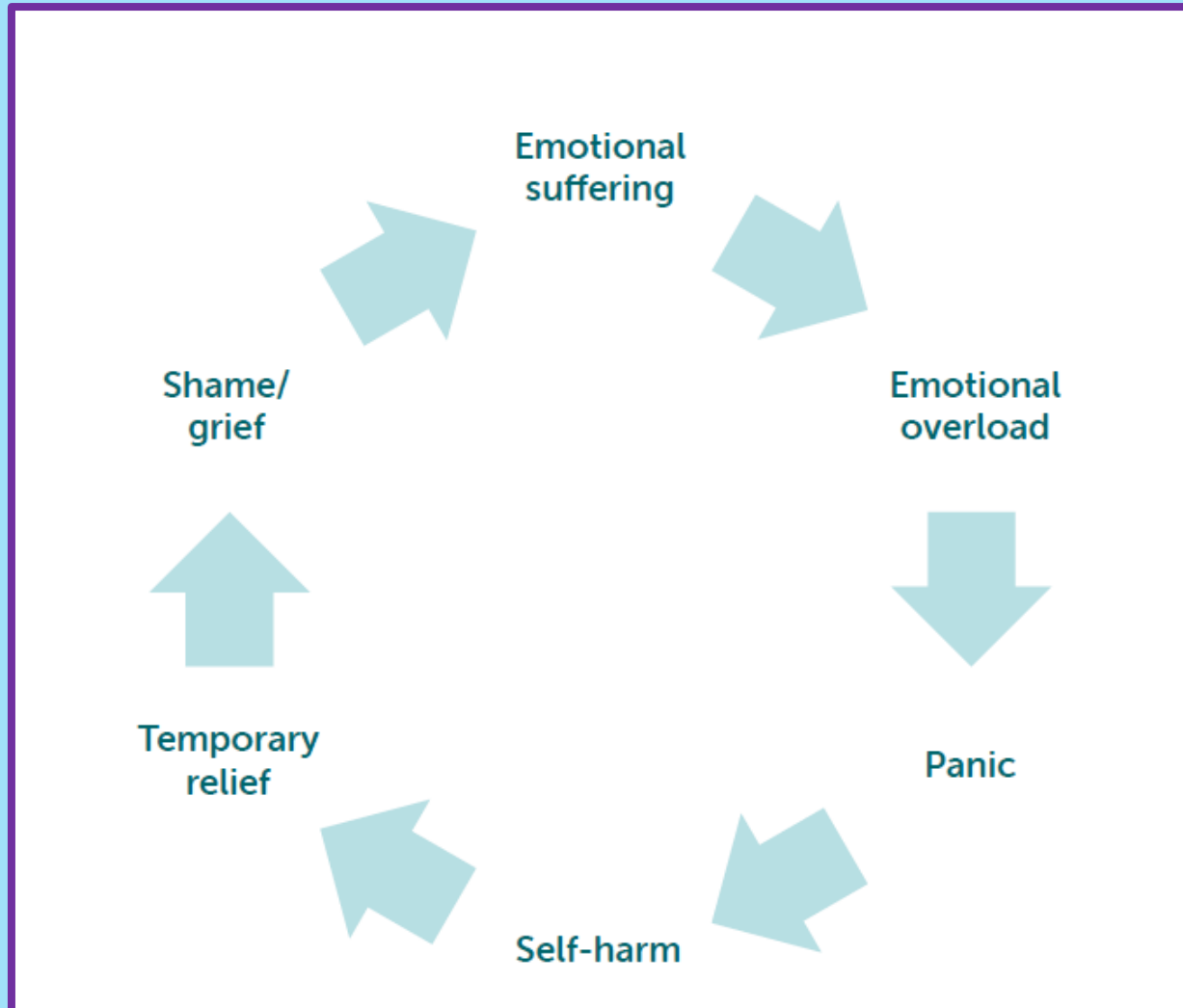
Socio-economic inequalities a major factor - most disadvantaged 40% have almost double the rates of attempted suicide (almost 12%) when compared to those with higher family incomes (around 6%)

(Millenium Cohort Study 2021)

Steps to take if a young person is in crisis or makes a disclosure of self-harm or suicidal intent:

- **Protect time and space to listen to them** without interruption; think about the setting you are in
- **Listen calmly**, without judgement or rushing to solutions (unless it is an emergency and requires immediate intervention)
- **Validate the emotion**, not necessarily the behaviour
- **Provide information** about where or how to access appropriate support
- **Encourage young people** to make safe, informed decisions
- **Don't make promises** you can't keep

Why might staff find it difficult to help?



Because self-harm can reduce tension and help control mood (as well as release endorphins), it can be self-reinforcing and habit forming. Staff need to understand that it is difficult to break the cycle of self-harm and can't just insist someone stops..

Be Prepared

- by knowing how to engage with YP in distress
- by knowing what help / support is available should there be a crisis
- by having someone that you can debrief with / talk to
- by ensuring all staff have at least some minimal SP training (eg zero suicide alliance training (free!))

Check your **schools policy** and ensure there is a clear advice around creating a safety plan and know who you can contact in an emergency

Use our '**Be CLEAR**' acronym for tips on how to engage..

Be **CLEAR** (see video on Breathe website)

Check for suicidal thoughts and intentions – let them know you are concerned about them and **ask them directly** if they are having any thoughts about suicide. If yes - **check** whether they have made any plans and do not leave the young person alone

Listen to their story – It's important to listen to a young person non-judgmentally, give them time to communicate how they feel and let you know what's been going on for them

Empathise and inform – reassure them that they do not have to cope with this alone – that you are there to help and to get them the right support

Apply self-help techniques – ask about their support network and if there is not an immediate crisis - help them make a safety plan of what has helped in the past and what could help now

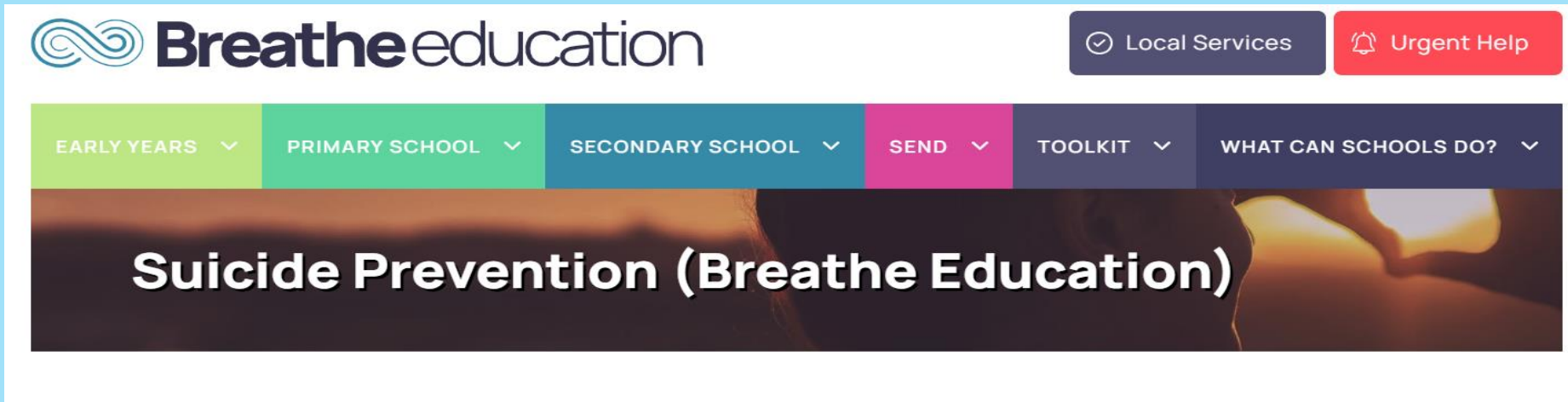
Reduce access to common methods of suicide - and also to places where suicide may be more likely to occur - this can be an effective way of preventing suicide. **Refer** to professionals..



What are we doing in Birmingham?

Working to integrate support with MHST's and community teams

Developing support and guidance for staff working in schools..



<https://breathe-edu.co.uk/resource/suicide-prevention-breathe-education/>

Listening to a young person talk about self-harm or suicide is difficult and it's not uncommon to be reflecting on the conversation long after it has taken place

Remember to think about your own support networks.

Everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention - and while there is no perfect way of dealing with every situation, by sharing good practice - we can do all that we can to prevent suicide occurring

Summary



Self-Harm is a sign of distress in young people and should always be taken seriously

It's a key risk factor for suicide (especially repeated self-harm)

Engaging with YP who self harm and helping them to identify what helps with safety plans, support networks and reducing stress is vital

Ensure your school has a clear Self Harm & Suicide Prevention Policy and all know how to engage when concerned

Remember the importance of your own support and debrief networks

Further info, policy and guidance examples will be added to the information on the Breathe Education website – check the QR code

Thank You!



Useful online resources for CYP suicide prevention

- **Childline** has advice for children having suicidal thoughts and information and tips for dealing with self-harm
- **PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide** is a UK charity dedicated to the prevention of suicide and the promotion of positive mental health and emotional wellbeing in young people
- **Ripple Suicide Prevention Tool** is a free browser extension that signposts people who have searched for suicide or self-harm content to mental health support and advice. You should consider adding this extension to any computers your child has access to
- **Samaritans** is for anyone who's struggling to cope or who needs someone to listen without judgement or pressure
- The **OLLIE Foundation** provides advice on how to talk about suicide

Useful APPS for CYP self-harm / suicide prevention (as recommended by Papyrus helpline users)

- **Stay Alive** app is packed full of features. Papyrus users say they use it to access a mini safety plan, helpful resources, phone numbers, breathing techniques and strategies for staying safe from suicide.
- **Calm Harm** was developed by a Clinical Psychologist and designed to help people to resist or manage the urge to self-harm. Password protected ensures all information can be kept private.
- **Mood Panda** is an interactive mood diary that enables users to update and track their moods, helping young people to understand what impacts on their mood. It also has a feature to print out personal weekly and monthly mood history for use in therapy sessions or for self-care
- **MoodGYM** is an interactive program to help young people with low mood. Based on cognitive behaviour and interpersonal therapy, it consists of five modules which help to explore why you feel the way you do. The app helps with recognising sources of distress and to change thinking
- **Voda.co** is an LGBTQIA+ mental wellness app developed with leading NHS LGBTQIA+ psychotherapists: it provides self-guided digital therapy programmes derived from mindfulness and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- **Pacifica**: - meditation app is recommended by Papyrus helpline advisors for young people