

## SCHOOLS, TEACHERS & STUDENTS

# Self-harm: how to respond

Self-harm involves deliberately harming oneself physically via cutting, burning, hitting, scratching, biting, or consuming harmful substances. A young person may engage in self-harm behaviour without suicidal ideation. However, self-harm is a risk factor for suicide and consistent responses founded upon compassion are therefore required.

### Why do young people self-harm?

Self-harm is often used to try and control difficult and overwhelming feelings or to gain some kind of relief from emotional pain. It may also be used to express anger, to feel 'something' or to communicate a need for help.

Young people who self-harm may have been experiencing a range of problems:

- Difficulty getting along with family members or friends
- Feeling isolated or bullied by someone
- Relationship breakup
- Current or past physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect
- Loss of someone close such as a parent, sibling or friend
- Serious or ongoing illness or physical pain

Research indicates young people are especially at risk if they have these additional characteristics: have a personality disorder or other mental disorder, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, LGBTQIA, in out-of-home care, female, or live in a rural area.

### How to respond

Talk to the young person in a compassionate way, and ask them what is going on for them. Assess the risk using the flowchart below and make a plan for the person, which usually includes referring the young person to the appropriate care and welfare support.

It is important to note that a young person who self-harms may experience shame and self-loathing about their behaviour. It is therefore vital to have these discussions in a caring manner that highlights the struggles that the young person is going through and provides opportunities for support from adults.

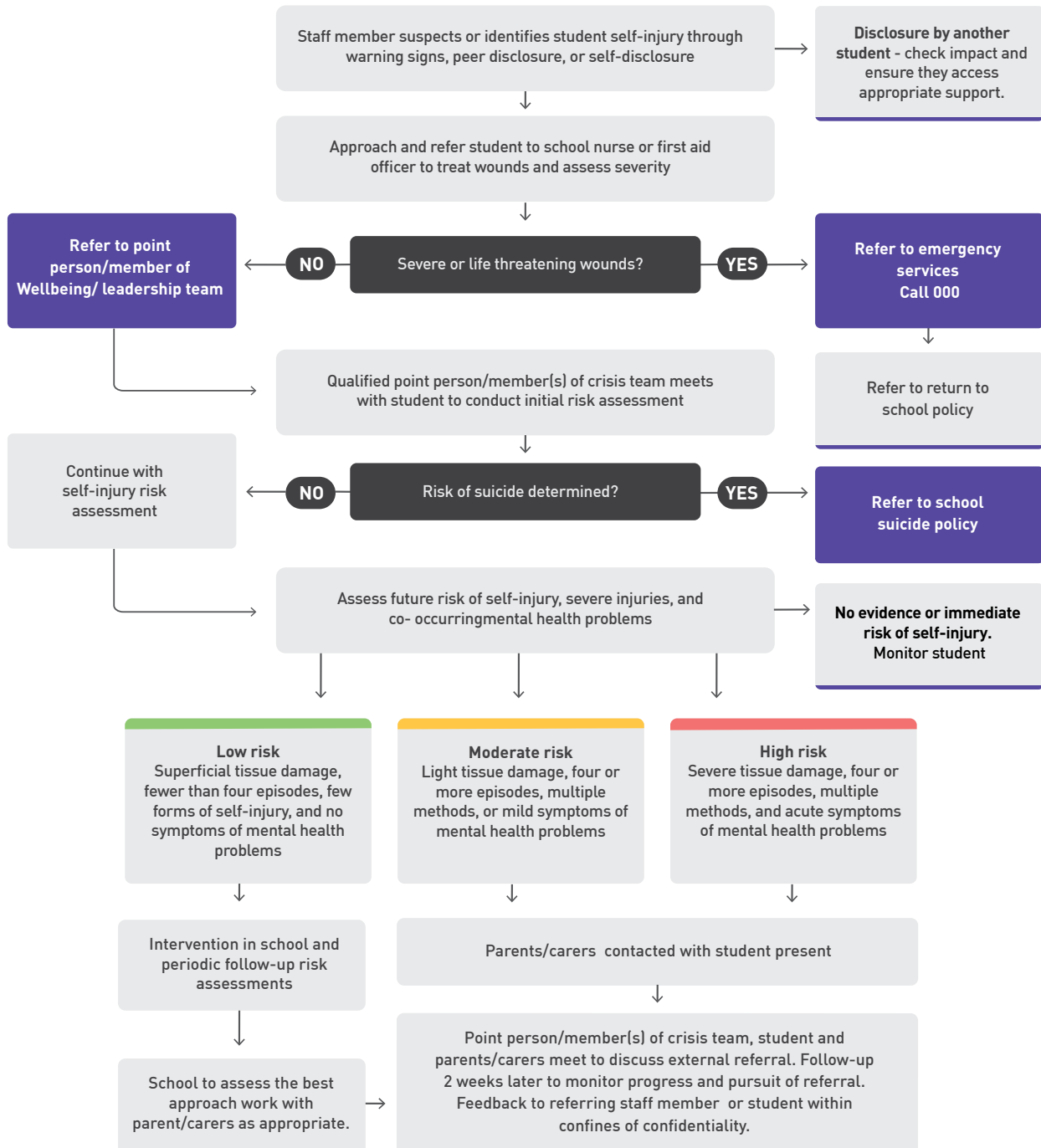
### Strategies for managing social contagion

Social contagion refers to the process whereby one instance of self-harm within a school or community increases the likelihood that other instances will occur. Students with complex mental health concerns may be more vulnerable to social contagion and self-harm because they may believe it to be an effective coping strategy.

- Provide a safe and confidential environment for students to talk about their feelings and issues
- Educate young people on identifying distress in themselves and teach positive coping skills
- Aim to increase the protective factors in the young person's life
- Inform students about professional help and where it is available in the school setting and outside of schools
- Talk to students who self-harm and their parents/carers about the importance of keeping visible signs of self-harm private
- Identify and monitor young people at risk, and provide one on one support where appropriate
- Ask students who self-harm to refrain from discussing it with other students
- Discuss concerns with parents/carers, unless making contact would place a student at risk due to child protection issues
- Provide parents/carers with information about self-harm and support options for families
- Educate students on the appropriate use of social media and the dangers associated with the internet (for example, how quickly posts can go 'viral')

## Responding to self-harm at school: MindMatters model

All incidents of self-harm should be responded to quickly. Use this flowchart to guide staff responses to an incident at your school, or to develop your school's self-harm response procedures. It may be useful to display this flowchart in a prominent location in staff rooms.



<http://www.mindmatters.edu.au/spotlights/self-harm>