

# A guide to **UNDERSTANDING NON-SUICIDAL SELF INJURY**



Developed as part of  
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving  
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





Let's talk

about

## UNDERSTANDING NON-SUICIDAL SELF INJURY

### **Being a young person can be equal parts interesting, fun and challenging!**

While one may be exploring their unique identities and finding out more about the things they are passionate about, life at this age can sometimes feel really overwhelming. Between school, friendships, family, and everything else going on, it's easy to feel like there's too much to handle. We all have moments when emotions get intense — when you're stressed, anxious, deeply hurt, angry, or just exhausted and can't find the right words to explain what's going on inside.

Sometimes, when feelings are intense and one may be struggling to find ways to deal with them or express them, some people may turn to Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI) as a way to cope or feel some kind of control. Did you know, engaging in NSSI is not about wanting to die. It is often about trying to manage pain that feels too big to deal with in any other way. While it might bring short-term relief, it can also bring up feelings of guilt, confusion, or shame about the act.



**If this sounds familiar, you're not alone.** Many of us struggle with heavy emotions and look for ways to make things feel okay again. This guide is here to help you understand what NSSI is, why it happens, and how you can find safer, healthier ways to cope. There is always hope, and with the right support, it is possible to feel better and heal.

Let's try to understand NSSI better:

## How is NSSI Different from Self-Harm?



**Self-harm** is a broad term that includes any behavior that causes harm to oneself, whether intentional or unintentional. This could include behaviors like excessive substance use, physical harm caused to one's body, or engaging in dangerous activities without care for personal safety.

**NSSI**, on the other hand, is the term used when one may deliberately or intentionally injure oneself without wanting to take their life. It has been understood to be a method of dealing with emotional pain, often repeatedly, turning this behaviour into a way of coping.

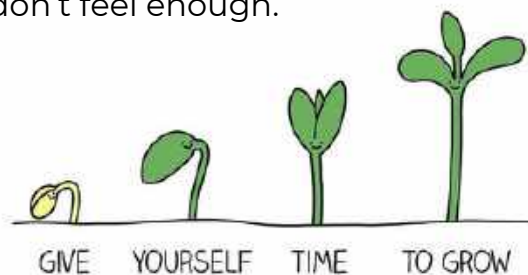


## How is NSSI Different from Suicidal Behavior?

NSSI and suicidal behavior may seem similar, but they have distinct differences:

- **NSSI is not an attempt to end one's life.**

People may engage in NSSI for many different and complex reasons — to find relief from intense emotional pain, to regain a sense of control when things feel overwhelming, or to express the depth and urgency of what they're going through when words don't feel enough.



- **Suicidal behavior involves an intent to die.**

Suicidal behavior occurs when someone feels that living has become too painful and believes that taking their life might be the only way to end their suffering. It reflects deep emotional distress and a need for understanding, safety, and support.

- **NSSI can increase the risk of suicidal thoughts over time.**

Over time, repeatedly using NSSI can turn it into an unhealthy way of coping. It also carries a high risk of physical harm and can make emotional distress harder to handle over time.

## Why Do People Engage in NSSI?

People engage in NSSI for various reasons, including:



**To relieve intense emotions:** Some people feel overwhelmed with sadness, anger, or frustration and use self-injury as a way to let these emotions out.

**To feel something when feeling numb:** Emotional numbness can be distressing, and physical pain might feel like a way to reconnect with emotions.



**To express distress when words fail:** When emotions are difficult to articulate, physical injury may seem like the only way to show pain.

**To regain a sense of control:** When life feels chaotic, self-injury might offer a false sense of control over one's emotions or body.



## Recognizing Signs of NSSI

Physical Signs	Behavioral Signs	Emotional Signs
<div data-bbox="284 1346 392 1451" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="225 1541 456 1659">Unexplained cuts, burns, or bruises.</p> <p data-bbox="161 1720 523 1839">Frequent bandages or scars in similar locations.</p> <p data-bbox="161 1921 549 2040">Wearing long sleeves or pants even in hot weather to hide injuries.</p>	<div data-bbox="708 1335 852 1451" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="660 1532 904 1608">Avoiding social interactions.</p> <p data-bbox="700 1720 865 1839">Increased secrecy or isolation.</p> <p data-bbox="633 1912 973 2076">Collecting sharp objects (razors, scissors, lighters) without clear reason.</p>	<div data-bbox="1123 1335 1302 1509" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="1026 1541 1414 1617">Intense mood swings or emotional distress.</p> <p data-bbox="1102 1720 1337 1883">Expressing feelings of worthlessness or self-hatred.</p> <p data-bbox="1019 1921 1422 1998">Difficulty handling stress or emotions.</p>

## When is Self-Harm Becoming Dangerous?



If injuries become more severe or frequent.

If self-harm is accompanied by suicidal thoughts.

If self-harm is interfering with daily life or relationships.

## The Cyclic Nature of NSSI

NSSI often follows a repetitive and reinforcing cycle:

- ① **Trigger:** A distressing situation, thought, or emotion occurs. This could be anything from academic stress, conflicts with friends or family, feeling lonely, or experiencing deep emotional pain.



- ② **Urge:** The individual feels an overwhelming urge to engage in NSSI as a way to cope with the emotional distress. This urge may seem like the only way to feel better at that point of time.

- ③ **Action:** The person engages in self-injury as a means of relieving distress. The act may bring temporary relief or create a feeling of control over emotions.



- ④ **Temporary Relief:** Immediately after self-harm, the individual may experience a sense of calm, emotional release, or distraction from overwhelming emotions. This reinforces the behavior.

- ⑤ **Guilt/Shame:** Once the relief fades, negative emotions often return- sometimes stronger than before. Feelings of guilt, shame, regret, or self-hatred can arise, making the person feel trapped.



- ⑥ **Reinforcement & Repetition:** The cycle restarts as distress builds up again, leading the individual to rely on self-harm as a coping mechanism, increasing its frequency over time.

This cycle makes NSSI difficult to break without alternative coping strategies, which we will explore later in this guide.

## Let's Reflect

Draw a cycle of self-harm and then sketch a healthier cycle where positive coping strategies replace NSSI. This can help visualize alternatives to breaking the pattern.

## Let's Play True or False!



### People who self-injure just want attention

False! Many individuals who engage in NSSI hide their wounds and do not seek attention. Instead of dismissing or judging them, try to offer a safe space for open conversations about emotions.

### Mostly teenagers engage in NSSI because they are more emotional

False! NSSI may be a behaviour people of all ages engage in, from children to adults. Rather than assuming it is a phase, encourage open discussions about emotional health across all age groups.

### If someone self-injures, they are suicidal.



False! While NSSI can be linked to suicidal thoughts, they are not the same. If someone is self-harming, it is important to ask how they are feeling and help them find healthier coping mechanisms before their distress escalates.



### NSSI is not a phase: it has underlying issues and needs to be addressed

True! Without addressing the underlying emotional challenge, NSSI can persist or worsen over time. Instead of waiting for it to pass, supporting mental health education and seeking professional help can lead to long-term recovery.

## NSSI is not a permanent “habit”- it can get better.

True! Recovery is always possible, no matter how long someone has been engaging in NSSI. Many people have successfully learned healthier coping mechanisms and have healed. With the right support and strategies, breaking the cycle is absolutely achievable.



## Coping with NSSI

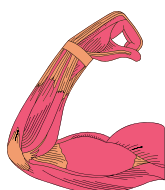
Breaking the cycle of NSSI is not easy, but it is possible. The following strategies, based on psychological research and therapeutic practices, can help you manage distress in healthier ways:

### Physical Alternatives



Use a stress relieving toy like a fidget spinner or snap a rubber band on your wrist (gently) to mimic sensation without injury.

Hold ice cubes in your hand or run them over your skin, especially at the points where you feel the urge to harm.



Tense and release muscles to ground yourself in your body. For example, clench your fist really tightly and slowly release.

Engage in high intensity exercise, such as jumping jacks or running in place, to release pent-up energy.



## Creative Expression



- Art journaling: Draw or paint your emotions.
- Write poetry or stream-of-consciousness letters to your feelings. For example, let your thoughts flow and keep putting them on paper as they flow, without analysing or judging your thoughts.
- Dance to music that reflects how you feel.
- Sculpt with clay or dough to express tension.

### Emotions Check-In

Let's try an activity to help you explore difficult emotions creatively, and to begin recognizing the needs behind those emotions.

#### Step 1: Check In with Yourself (5 minutes)

- Start by closing your eyes and taking three deep breaths. Ask yourself:
- What am I feeling right now?
- Where do I feel it in my body?
- What color do I associate with this feeling?
- Write down the emotion and the color(s) that come to mind.



#### Step 2: Create Your Feeling Landscape (10–15 minutes)

Using your chosen colors, create a drawing or abstract art piece that represents what you are feeling. It could be a stormy sky, tangled lines, waves, fire, or even a blank space- there is no right or wrong.

Prompt Questions to Reflect While Drawing:

- What shapes or images match this feeling?
- If this emotion had a voice, what would it say?

What does this feeling need from me right now?



### Step 3: Give It a Name (5 minutes)

Once the art is complete, look at it and write a short description:

- What does it express?
- Is this emotion trying to protect you from something?

What do you need when you feel this way?



### Step 4: Reimagine the Feeling (10 minutes)

On a new page, draw a companion image—what the feeling might look like after it is heard and supported. This could include different colors, calming shapes, or symbols of hope.

### Step 5: Anchor with a Message (5 minutes)

Write a short message to yourself, like:

- “I am allowed to feel overwhelmed.”
- “This emotion does not control me.”
- “There are ways to release pain without harm.”



### Step 6: Take the Learning Forward

- What did I learn about my emotions today?
- How can I use creativity next time I feel overwhelmed?



### 3. Sensory Techniques



- Aromatherapy: Use calming scents like lavender or peppermint. Try to close your eyes or lower your gaze as you take a few breaths to appreciate the soothing scents.



- Texture grounding: Hold soft fabrics, textured objects, or smooth stones. Focus on how the textures feel against your skin. Try to pay attention to the pleasant or neutral sensations you feel when holding this object.



- Taste change: Suck on a sour candy or drink something hot or cold. Tasting something new can help bring attention to the present moment and experience, taking mind off of unpleasant or stressful thoughts.



- Sound healing: Listen to sounds of nature or calming music to reduce stress, unwind and create a peaceful atmosphere.

### 4. Challenge the Negative Thoughts Cycle

- ① Challenge negative thoughts and replace them with positive affirmations: Negative thoughts often feel automatic and believable, especially during stress. Challenging them helps break the cycle of self-criticism or fear by questioning their accuracy and replacing them with healthier, more balanced beliefs.

#### How to do it:

**Identify the thought:** Notice when you say things like “I can’t handle this” or “I always mess up.”

**Examine the evidence:** Ask yourself, “Is this 100% true? What facts support or contradict it?”

**Reframe it:** Turn the thought into something realistic and self-supportive. For example, “I’ve handled difficult things before; I can figure this out.”

**Create affirmations:** Write short, empowering statements aligned with your values (e.g., “I am capable,” “I am learning,” “I can take this one step at a time.”)

**Repeat them daily:** Use them during stressful moments or as part of a morning routine.

## 2 Use problem-solving techniques to address the underlying distress:

Sometimes distress persists because the root issue hasn't been addressed. Problem-solving helps you break situations down, evaluate options, and take concrete steps toward solutions.

### How to do it:

**Define the problem clearly:** Instead of "Everything is overwhelming," specify what is overwhelming.

**Brainstorm solutions:** List out possible ways to handle the issue—no judging yet.

**Evaluate pros and cons:** Choose the option that feels doable and effective.

**Break it into small steps:** Big solutions become less intimidating when divided into manageable tasks.

**Take action and review:** Try the plan, then reflect on what worked and what needs adjusting.



## 3 Keep a thought journal to track emotional triggers.



A thought journal slows down emotional spirals by helping you notice patterns, triggers, and how your body and mind respond. It also strengthens self-awareness and supports healthier coping habits.

### How to do it:

**Write down the situation:** What happened? Who was involved?

**Record your emotions:** Name the feelings and rate their intensity.

**Capture your thoughts:** What went through your mind in the moment?

**Reflect on your entries:** Notice any repeating themes or trigger points.

**Add alternative thoughts:** Over time, include more balanced perspectives or strategies that can help.

# Let's Reframe the Thought Spiral

## Part 1: Catch the Thought

Start by reflecting on a moment you felt upset, overwhelmed, or had an urge to self-harm. Ask yourself:

- What was I thinking right before I felt this way?
- What did I say to myself in my head?

Write down the exact thought (e.g., "I mess up everything," "No one cares," "I will never feel better").

## Part 2: Check the Thought

Now ask yourself:

- Is this thought 100% true?
- What evidence supports this thought?
- What evidence against this thought am I ignoring?
- If my best friend had this thought, what would I tell them?

Write down your responses. You may begin to notice that the thought is exaggerated or not entirely true.

## Part 3: Change the Thought

Now that you have examined the thought, try writing a more balanced version:

- Original Thought: "I am a failure."
- New Thought: "I made a mistake, but I am learning. That does not make me a failure."

Remind yourself: It is okay to feel negative emotions- but your thoughts are not always facts.

## Thought Reframe Table

Use this table weekly to build the skill of noticing and reframing.

Situation	Automatic Thought	Evidence For	Evidence Against	Reframed Thought
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## Part 4: Use Self-Compassion

Close your eyes and take a breath. Place a hand on your chest and say one kind sentence to yourself. Try saying:

- “This is a tough moment, but I am not alone.”
- “I am doing the best I can right now.”
- “This feeling will pass.”

## 4 Emotional Expression & Regulation

Emotions are not the enemy. Learning to express and regulate them helps reduce the urge to self-harm:

- Name the emotion you are feeling (e.g., sadness, anger, fear).
- Use emotion wheels or charts to increase emotional vocabulary.
- Practice mindfulness or grounding exercises like 5-4-3-2-1 (noticing 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste).

## 5 Reaching Out for Help

- Talk to someone you trust: a friend, parent, teacher, or counselor.
- Seek therapy: A trained professional can help you explore deeper issues and build long-term strategies.
- Join peer support groups: Online or in-person groups can reduce isolation and provide spaces to learn new skills.

Create a coping toolbox: Fill a box with reminders of hope—photos, quotes, textures, scents, distractions, and emergency contacts.

## Reflection Activity

Create your own personalized Coping Plan. Divide a paper into four sections: physical, creative, emotional, and support. List 3 strategies you can try in each category.



## Remember

**Healing takes time, but every small step matters. You are not defined by your struggles, and there is always hope.**



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