



# GUIDE

## LOOKING OUT FOR SELF-HARM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

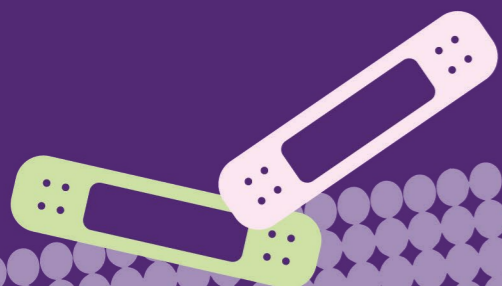


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# 1. ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide aims to alert fathers, mothers and teachers about the particular language – coded language – that young people use on social media to talk about non-suicidal self-harm (also known as non-suicidal self-injury; hereinafter, we will also use the acronym NSSH).

It is essential to **inform, raise awareness and caution** about these behaviours so that they are not directly associated with suicide.

Identifying how young people **create, share and consume social media content** related to **self-harm** is essential in order to be able to help them.

This guide can contribute to:

- Knowing what the **initial alarm signals are and how to act**.
- Identifying the **language that young people use on social media** to talk about self-harm. Knowing the codes they use enables us to be alert to potential signals that may indicate consumption of said content.
- Understanding which **strategies** can be implemented to **foster more positive use of social media** given the phenomenon of self-harm.



## 2. WHAT IS NON-SUICIDAL SELF-HARM?

Non-suicidal self-harm is a behaviour in which a person harms themselves, repeatedly and on different parts of their body, without suicidal intentions.

This type of behaviour is used as a self-regulation strategy in the face of emotions such as anxiety, anguish, stress, frustration or anger when the person does not have other tools available to cope with them. People who self-harm feel emotional relief upon inflicting physical pain on themselves as it disconnects them from their psychological distress.



Non-suicidal self-harm is not a new behaviour and there are even cultures in which it is socially acceptable, such as self-flagellation in religious contexts, fakirs in performances and body art (e.g. tattoos and piercings).

The most common methods are cutting, burning or hitting to the hands, arms, legs or stomach, generally caused by knives, needles, lighters or any type of sharp object<sup>1</sup>. Cutting and burning is most common among girls, while hitting or punching tends to be the most common NSSH behaviour among boys.

It is important not to identify NSSH with suicide: **THEY DO NOT HAVE THE SAME INTENT**

Non-suicidal self-harm ► deliberately inflicting harm on oneself which can cause pain, such as cutting, burning, punching or hitting **without suicidal intent**.

Suicidal behaviour ► potentially self-harming behaviour with some degree of **intent** to die.



<sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2022). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5- TR). Washington, DC



### 3. IS THERE A PROFILE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WHOSELF-HARM?

Young people **begin to self-harm at very early ages (from approximately 11 years old<sup>2</sup>); the age range** within which this behaviour is most frequently observed is **between 14 and 17 years of age.**

- Any young person may go through the process of self-harming; there is no specific profile of young people who engage in this behaviour.
- Self-harm is not aligned with one gender<sup>3</sup>, origin, culture or social class. Although some studies hold that it is more frequent among girls, it is also significantly observed in boys. These gender differences may be due to social and cultural factors, where the demands of the social role of women – as regards body and beauty, among other aspects - place girls under great emotional pressure. It may also be due to the fact that girls dare to verbalise more than boys that they self-harm, or that the self-harming hitting in boys<sup>4</sup> goes more unnoticed due to gender roles; therefore it is important to be vigilant with regard to male self-harm
- It manifests very differently in each person.

<sup>2</sup> Barrocas, A. L., Hankin, B. L., Young, J. F., & Abela, J. R. (2012). Rates of nonsuicidal self-injury in youth: age, sex, and behavioral methods in a community sample. *Pediatrics*, 130(1), 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2094>

<sup>3</sup> Victor, S. E., Muehlenkamp, J. J., Hayes, N. A., Lengel, G. J., Styer, D. M., & Washburn, J. J. (2018). Characterizing gender differences in nonsuicidal self-injury: Evidence from a large clinical sample of adolescents and adults. *Comprehensive psychiatry*, 82, 53–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2018.01.009>

<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, P.O., Qiu, T., Jesmont, C., Neufeld, S.A.S. Kaur, S.P., Jones, P.B., & Goodyer, I.M. (2022) Age and gender effects on non-suicidal self-injury, and their interplay with psychological distress. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 306, 240-245 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.03.021>)



## 4. WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE SELF-HARM?

The **reasons** why a young person engages in NSSH are complex and depend on each case. They may have one or several motivations, which tend to be related to circumstances associated with their environment (family, friends, school or college) or their personality (low self-esteem), among others.

Self-harm is always a manifestation of **intense emotional suffering** that the adolescent does not know how to manage. When they self-harm, they feel a sensation of great relief from all their psychological and emotional malaise, and therefore repeatedly engage in this behaviour.



SELF-HARM IS A CRY OF PAIN AND A CALL FOR HELP THAT THEY DO NOT KNOW HOW TO EXPRESS WITH WORDS.

According to health experts, the main motivations for self-harm among young people are<sup>5</sup>:

- **EMOTIONAL REGULATION:** it is a way to reduce pain and negative emotions such as anxiety, anguish, stress, sadness and self-reproach, or to resolve social problems with their peers.
- **MEANS OF ESCAPE:** it is a strategy adopted by many adolescents to cope with their distress (feeling alone, angry, sad or overwhelmed by others), given that they lack other tools for emotional regulation.

**CAREFUL!** Self-harming offers them temporary relief from their pain but until they identify the reason why they self-harm, it will reappear.



<sup>5</sup> American Psychiatric Association (2022). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR). Washington, DC



**CAREFUL!** As adults, we must NOT think that self-harming is just to “attract attention”. They are SIGNS OF PAIN felt by young people who do not know how to ask for help and NEED help. ► WE AS ADULTS MUST HELP THEM AND NOT PLAY DOWN THEIR BEHAVIOUR. TALKING ABOUT THEIR FEELINGS IS OUR OPPORTUNITY TO ACHIEVE A CHANGE.



Self-harming is a strategy adopted by many adolescents to cope with their distress, given that they lack other tools for emotional regulation.

The physical pain provides relief/escape from the psychological and emotional pain the adolescent is going through, triggered by a huge sense of loneliness or social anxiety due to changes during the transition from childhood to adulthood, among many other causes.

- **RELIEF AND TRANQUILLITY:** the physical pain automatically triggers in these young people a sense of comfort, relief and calm and momentarily overrides their other problems.
- **CONTROL:** faced with psychological overwhelm and a sense of not controlling their malaise, it is used by adolescents to feel they have control over something in their lives.
- **FEELING OF EMPTINESS:** they feel that self-harm is a form of deserved self-punishment.
- **SEARCH FOR IDENTITY:** Asome young people share their self-harming behaviour and experience on social media, as they are looking for groups of peers with whom they identify and by whom they do not feel judged. This is leading self-harming to become something that is desirable for them.

**CAREFUL!** Repeatedly sharing NSSH behaviour can become an addiction as the self-harming is repeated more frequently over time and the manner in which they engage in it is more virulent.



## 5. WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF SELF-HARMING?

Young people tend to hide their self-harming because they know society views this behaviour as reprehensible and undesirable. This makes it difficult for fathers, mothers and teachers to identify. However, some warning signs can be identified:

- **PHYSICAL SIGNS:** cuts, burns or bruises on arms, legs or abdomen.
- **BEHAVIOURAL SIGNS:** mood swings or abrupt changes in mood and social isolation from their friends and usual circle.
- **EMOTIONAL SIGNS:** feelings of despondency, loneliness or uselessness.
- **CLOTHING:** wearing long-sleeved clothing and/or long trousers even when it is hot, to prevent the injuries from being seen, or using multiple bracelets to cover the cuts.



## 6. WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE SEARCH FOR ABOUT SELF-HARM ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

Young people turn to social media to find other young people with whom they can share their NSSH behaviour and not be judged. They create identity groups to talk about methods and experiences, sharing videos, images and challenges about how to self-harm. These young people view social media as a place of comfort and safety, when, by contrast, it can foster the causes that lead to self-harm behaviour.

Young people on social media are looking for:

- **PEER GROUPS:** with whom they can share their experiences about self-harm without being judged.
- **UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORT:** from other young people who have the same interests and experiences about self-harming.
- **SAFETY:** on social media as it is a space where they do not feel rejected by others.
- **SHARING:** their questions, experiences and concerns with other young people about self-harm.
- **ANONYMITY:** on social media they find a false sense of anonymity; the effect of "being behind a screen" gives them the fictitious impression of being free to express their ideas and to generate and share content without being identified.



However, social media represents a potential risk factor for self-harm for a number of reasons:

- **NORMALISATION:** social networks such as Instagram, Twitter (by the time this guide was published, its name had changed to X) and TikTok show more self-harm content to adolescents than to adults.
- Viewing this content on social media activates an algorithm that encourages it to appear with increasing frequency – more viewing leads to more content appearing. Constantly viewing self-harm content on social media creates a realm of the imagination in which it seems that everybody engages in self-harming, giving rise to the normalisation of the phenomenon.
- Social media is a window providing access – anywhere, at any time of day and even from the privacy of one’s own home – to content on self-harming, representing a risk factor for a contagion effect.
- **DISTORTING REALITY:** social media submerges our young people in a fictitious reality. They build their dreams, desires and needs on the basis of what they have seen on their screens, and so when they have to face a reality that does not match that virtual fantasy it triggers great frustration, stress and anxiety that may lead to self-harming behaviour.
- **HAMPERING CAPACITY FOR SELF-EXPRESSION:** the specific forms of communication on social media based on simplifying language to the bare minimum – acronyms, emoticons and stickers, memes and word limits on posts – mean that messages lack the depth of spoken language.
- Constant use of this form of communication hinders proper development of the capacity for expression through words among young people; this is a factor which significantly inhibits the acquisition of basic skill levels during their teenage years, such as the ability to express what we are feeling and resources to resolve/ tackle conflicts and difficulties.

- The language used in virtual formats is impeding what it is that makes us human – that is, the way we communicate and express our emotions through language.
- **FALSE REFUGE:** on social media, the core topic of conversation about self-harming is not about counteracting or seeking alternatives (alternatives to physical harm) for coping with emotional distress but about observing how other people self-harm; the more serious the self-harming, the more viral the content. The effect of this is to increasingly validate self-harm and lead teenagers to desire to post ever more serious injuries in order to be acknowledged.
- **Eliminate content:** social network platforms can eliminate content after it has been posted whenever it contravenes their policies or the posted content can be flagged and reported by other users.
- **Suspend an account:** when a user has continued to post banned content, the platforms can suspend their account on a temporary or permanent basis.
- **RELIEF AND TRANQUILLITY:** the sensation of physical pain automatically triggers in these young people a sense of comfort, relief and calm and momentarily overrides their other problems.

The social networking platforms most used by young people are TikTok, Instagram and Twitter. These all have very restrictive policies on self-harming content.

Due to this, young people who self-harm have created new codes in order to maintain their communities of peers on social media as safe places where they can talk, but without alerting adults or the platforms’ monitoring systems.



Suicide and Self-harm Policy express prohibitions:

- "Under this policy, you can't promote, or otherwise encourage, suicide or self-harm..
- Violations of this policy include, but are not limited to:
  - encouraging someone to physically harm (...) themselves;
  - asking others for encouragement to engage in self-harm (...);and
  - sharing information, strategies, methods or instructions that would assist people to engage in self-harm (...)."
- (<https://help.twitter.com/es/rules-and-policies/glorifying-self-harm>)



Suicide and self-harm. "NOT ALLOWED.

- Showing, promoting, or providing instructions on suicide or self-harm, and related challenges, dares, games, and pacts, including naming or describing methods.
- Showing or promoting suicide or self-harm hoaxes.
- Sharing plans for suicide or self-harm".
- (<https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/es/mental-behavioral-health>)



"Our policies...

- We've never allowed people to celebrate or promote self-harm (...), and we also remove fictional depictions of (...) self-harm, as well as content that shows methods or materials." (<https://about.meta.com/actions/safety/topics/wellbeing/suicideprevention>)



## 7. HOW TO IDENTIFY SELF-HARM CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The codes being generated by young people on social media are made up of keywords, abbreviations and images with an inherent meaning, which in most cases at first glance do not appear to have any connection with self-harm; however, young people use them precisely due to how such codes hinder outsiders from associating them with the hidden meaning.

We need to become familiar with these codes in order to be able to help our young people and to prevent self-harming behaviour.

### 7.1. Keywords

Keywords sometimes appear as hashtags or are just mentioned within messages. The most common are:

KEYWORDS	MEANING
\$htwt	self harm on Twitter
198tw	number relating to looking after yourself on Twitter
5htwt	self harm on Twitter
armgillstwt	gills (cuts or scars like fish gills) on the arms
autolesi#nes	self-harm
barcodetwt	barcode on Twitter (pattern of linear wounds and scars resembling a barcode)
beanstwt	beans on Twitter ("beans" refers to the fat layer, or hypodermis)
bedrocktwt	cuts that reach the bone
bl00d	blood
catscratchstwt	various small cuts, on Twitter
cort3s	cuts

KEYWORDS	MEANING
fatcuttw	cutting on Twitter
local	other people who look at self-harm accounts and criticise them without understanding anything.
madeofbeans	Cut that reaches the fat layer (hypodermis)
madeofstyrofoamtw	cut that reaches the dermis layer, on Twitter
ouchietw	ouch
papercuttw	small cuts on Twitter
raspberrypillingtw	raspberry filling on Twitter
recoverytw	recovery on Twitter
redinktw	red ink on Twitter
redjuicetw	red juice on Twitter
redlinetw	red line on Twitter
scabtw	scar on Twitter
shedtw	self harm and eating disorder together on Twitter
sliceetw	cutting on Twitter
styrotw	cut which reaches the dermis layer (with the code of "styrofoam") on Twitter
subtw	community on Twitter
Tcctw	True Crime Community Twitter
trastotw	disorder or disordered on Twitter
venttw	vent, express oneself on Twitter
yeettw	expression of emotion or approval on Twitter
yellowsporgetw	cut which reaches the fat layer on Twitter

## 7.2. Abbreviations

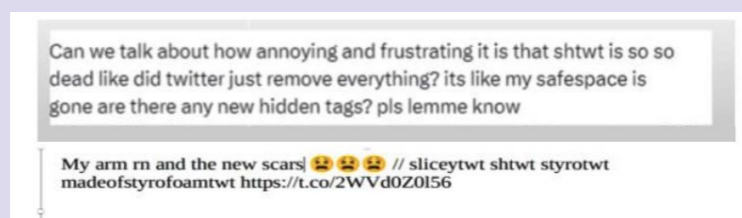
Abbreviations are a shortened form of a word and are commonly used by young people. They are generally abbreviations of words in English.

ABBREVIATIONS	MEANING
///	Cut
abt	About
acc	Account
amp	Amplifier

ABBREVIATIONS	MEANING
arfid	avoidant/restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID)
b/c	Because
bbg	better be going
bdp	Borderline personality disorder
bmf	be my friend
bmi	body mass index
c/t	cut
cgi	computer-generated image
cvt	cut
cw	content warning
dni	do not interact
ed	eating disorder
gc	group chat
gt	grand tour
idc	I don't care
idgf	I don't give a fuck
idm	I don't mind
ily	I love you
irl	in real life
kay em ess	kill myself
kms	kill myself
lmao	laughing my ass off
lol	laughing out loud
lt	laugh tour
mfs	middle finger salute)
moots	mutual followers
mutis	followers on Twitter
ngl	not gonna lie
nsfw	not suitable for work
nsfw	not safe for work
obs	obsessive
obslove	obsessive love
oc	original content
omad	one meal a day
pnrs	pronouns

ABBREVIATIONS	MEANING
ppl	people
rn	right now
sesh	session
sfx	special effects
sh	self harm
shtt	self harm
shtwt	self harm on Twitter
smt	"sucking my teeth" in texting to show disapproval or annoyance
smth	something
subtw	any community or group on Twitter
sus	suspicious
tlp	In Spanish, " trastorno límite de la personalidad" (borderline personality disorder, BDP)
tt	TikTok
tw	trigger warning
tw	Twitter
ugw	ultimate goal weight

### 7.3. Some examples of tweets using this language



### 7.4. Images with a specific meaning

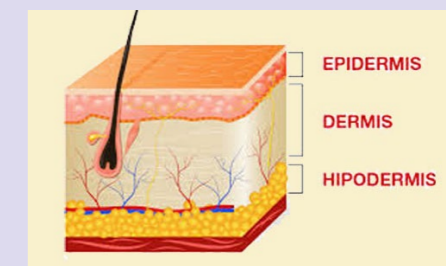
The content created by young people contains the codes typical of their age group and generation, such as memes using humour or compositions that are highly integrated into social media with images, photos and music.

### Memes



This meme explains the layers of our skin using the language of the self-harm community.

The plastic cup represents the dermis, the blue tin of beans represents the hypodermis (the fat layer) and the pink chocolate bar, muscle..



### Symbolic images

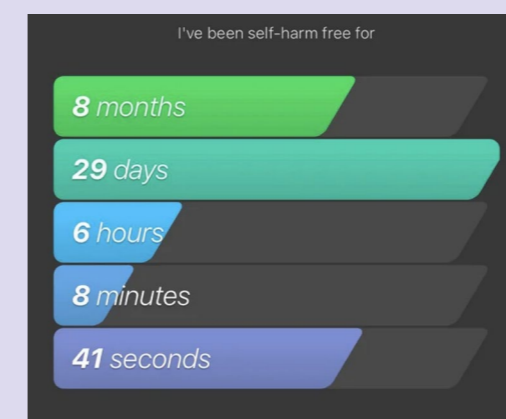


### Barcode

This image represents the keyword "barcode".

It is a symbolic representation of the linear cuts arising from self-harming.

### Graph



### Recovery

This graph counts the number of days that a person has been without engaging in self-harming behaviour.

This type of measurement is also used in other health-related situations such as anorexia, bulimia, alcoholism and drug addiction.

## Romanticising and the "cute" aesthetic

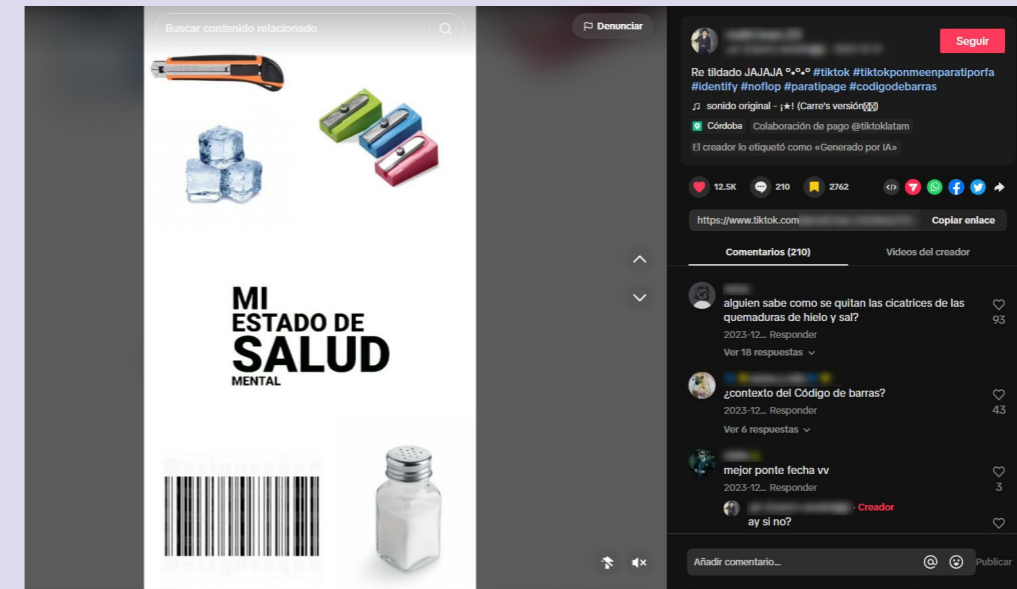
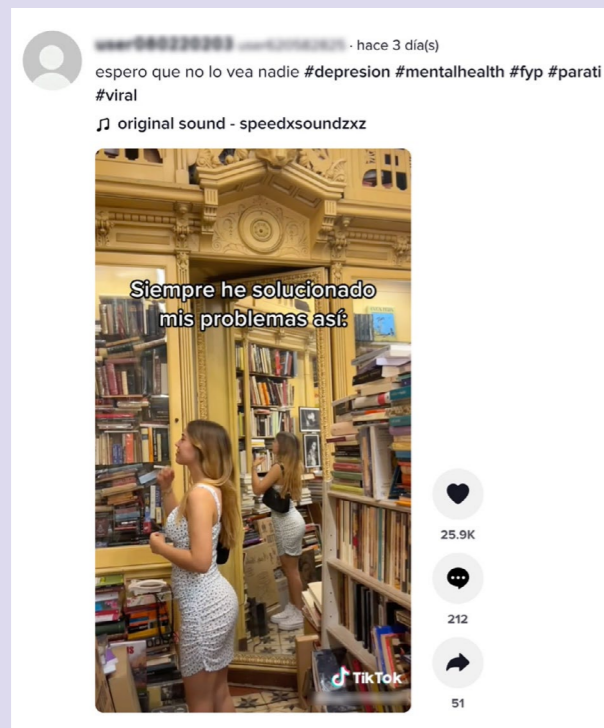


### "Cute" aesthetic

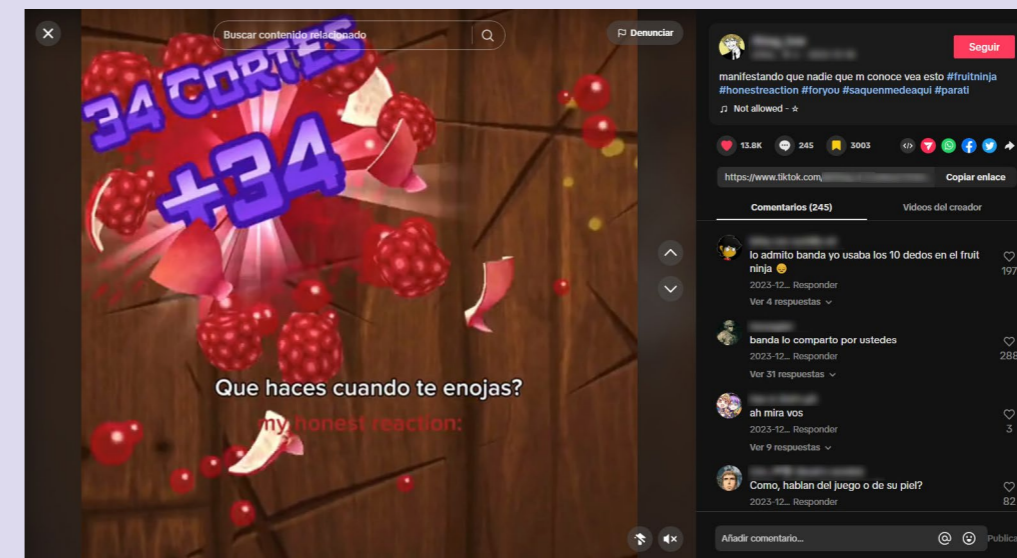
These cutters have a cute, child-based appearance, inspired by animated characters of Asian origin

People who self-harm share the tools they use on Twitter.

## Autobiography



## Simulating videogames



**CAREFUL!** THIS CONTENT CAN GIVE RISE TO THE CONTAGION EFFECT. IT IS IMPORTANT TO IDENTIFY THIS TYPE OF CONTENT AND HELP YOUNG PEOPLE TO PREVENT THIS HARMFUL BEHAVIOUR



## 8. WHERE TO FIND HELP

If you are concerned about or see any signs of this type of behaviour, you can ask for help from healthcare professionals or contact organisations that are experienced in dealing with self-harming.

### Professional support:

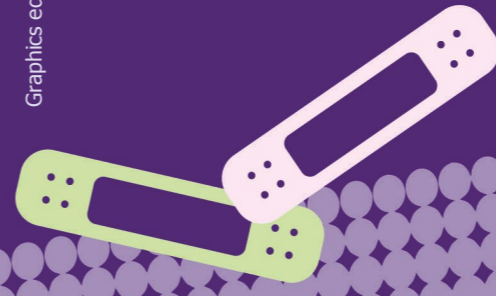
- Paediatricians, GPs or school counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists.

### Telephone support:

- Emergency services (Spain): 061 o 112
- Spain's Teléfono de la Esperanza: 717 003 717 (24-hour crisis care service in the major cities in Spain) [www.telefonodelaesperanza.org](http://www.telefonodelaesperanza.org)
- Children's telephone helpline from Fundación ANAR: 900 202 010  
[www.anar.org](http://www.anar.org)  
<https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Va7quuRBI-HpicXiTaN2x>

### Associations:

- Sociedad Internacional de Autolesión: [www.autolesion.com](http://www.autolesion.com)
- Centro Social Virtual de La Rueda Asociación. Free psychological care through email, chat and WhatsApp a través de correo electrónico, chat y whatsapp. <https://e-rueda.org>



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## LOOKING OUT FOR SELF-HARM ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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The "Representación mediática de las autolesiones de los menores en los medios de comunicación y Redes Sociales" ["Media representation of self-harming by children in the media and social networks"] (PID2021-1245500B-I00) project which forms part of the 2021 Knowledge Generation Projects call for proposals, subsidised by the National Plan from the Ministry of Science and Innovation (Spain).