

# A Guide to Coping with Urges to Self-Injure



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In this strategy guide, we share a number of helpful coping strategies that have been found to be useful by others struggling with self-injury. Often, recovery comes down to trying to cope moment-to-moment with the urges to self-injure, the day-to-day struggles with difficult emotions, as well as improving overall well-being in our lives. None of this is easy.

Many times you may feel very alone in this struggle. **But: You are NOT alone.** The strategies we present are taken from individuals, like you, who struggled with self-injury and who overcame it. Not all the suggestions will fit for you and that's okay. It can help though to choose and try the ones that feel right to you. Please also check out other guides for more self-injury support and resources. The last page of this booklet includes some referrals to organisations that might be able to support you.



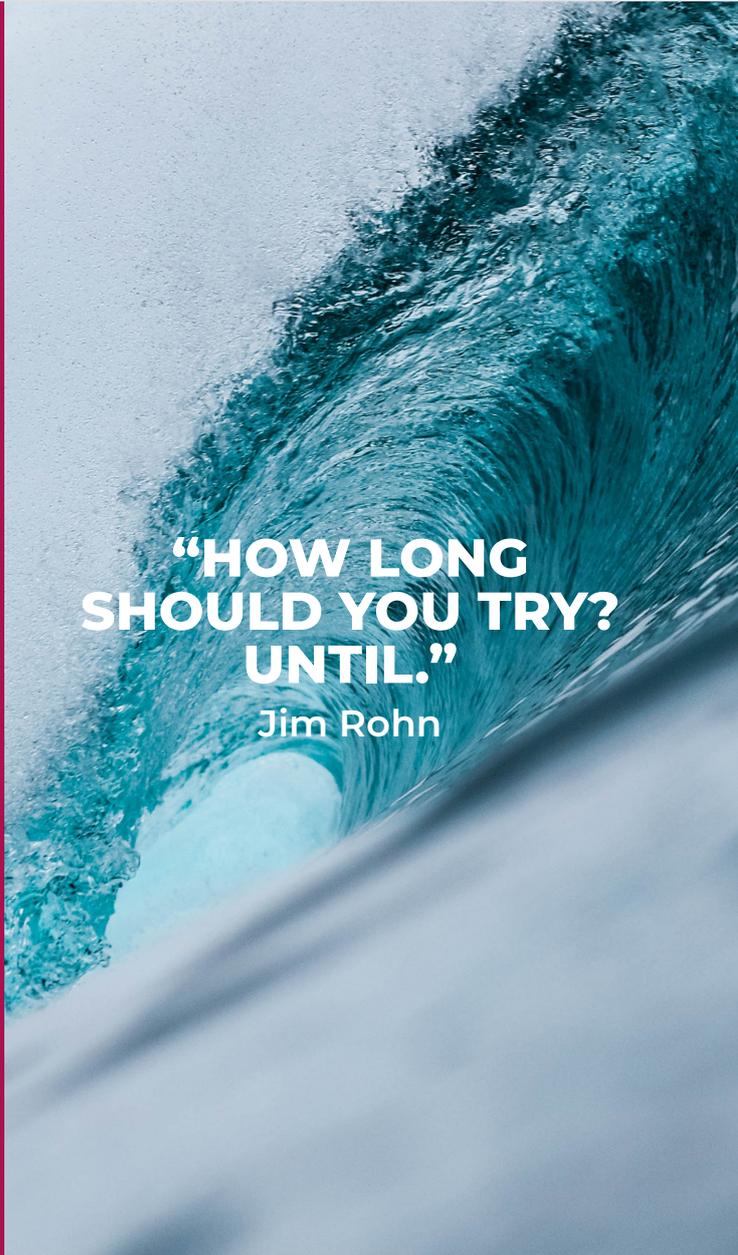
## The 15-Minute Rule

When you feel the urge to self-injure, instead of giving into the urge immediately, tell yourself that you will wait 15 minutes and set a timer. During those 15 minutes try some of the other coping techniques listed here. After the time is up, how do you feel? Has the urge diminished? Is it gone completely? If it's gone or smaller, make note of this.

## Ride the Wave

When coping with urges it can be helpful to become aware of how the urges start out and then become increasingly intense and, if resisted, they then decrease in intensity - just like a wave. Many therapies for self-injury focus on learning techniques, including: breathing, relaxation, and mindfulness to help you to “ride the wave” of these urges. This way, you can learn that if you can ride it out it will decrease and pass. This is why reading and thinking about the times when you have NOT acted on the urge can be very helpful. It is a good idea to practice mindful breathing and the relaxation and use them as tools to help you resist the urge and “ride the wave”.

Caroline Kettlewell, in her story of recovery from self-injury, stated: “I stopped cutting because I always could have stopped cutting; that’s the plain and inelegant truth. No matter how compelling the urge, the act itself was always a choice. I had no power over the urge, but the act itself was always a choice. I had no power over the flood tide of emotions that drove me to that brink, but I had the power to decide whether or not to step over. Eventually I decided not to.”  
Caroline Kettlewell, *Skin Game* (p. 177)



**“HOW LONG  
SHOULD YOU TRY?  
UNTIL.”**

Jim Rohn

## Relaxation

Slowly relaxing different parts of your body can be very helpful when resisting an urge to hurt yourself. People who have self-injured often say that this type of activity can be very helpful in resisting urges and feeling better. We are developing an audio file you can download and play from your phone, iPod, MP3 player or computer whenever you have an urge or need to relax.



## Keep and Review a Log

Keep and review a log...and think about times you wanted to self-injure but didn't... It can be very helpful to keep a log of the times you did not self-injure even though you felt the urge. This strategy requires that when you have the urge to self-injure, you look at your log and think about the times you had urges as strong as (or even stronger!) than the urge you have now and you DID NOT ACT ON IT. Think about how you have resisted the urge before and you can again. The urge to self-injure can be powerful, but everyone has experienced at least one time when they felt that urge but did not self-injure (even if it was because you were surrounded by people and could not find a way to be alone). Keep a record of these times. To do this, list the urge you felt, what brought it on, and the reasons why you did not self-injure. Was there something in the environment that stopped you? Was it something within you? Perhaps something you did instead? A combination of any number of these? Recognize these times and give yourself a pat on the back. There are a number of logs available online that may be useful to you. Remember: You can resist the urge and you have resisted it in the past.

## Talking to Someone

Talking to someone can be very helpful when you are having an intense urge to self-injure. This can be done in three ways:

1. Sharing your current urge to self-injure with another person and in order to not act on it. However, this may be very difficult and you may not have told anyone about your self-injury. In that case, you can still reach out to someone and talk to him/her about your intense and difficult emotions that are making you want to self-injure even if you do not share your self-injury or your urge.
2. If it is too difficult to share these intense emotions, you can still reach out to someone and talk to him/her. To distract yourself from your emotions and urges you can talk about other things. If you can't reach the first person you call, try someone else. It may be helpful to make a list of people who you can call close by to remind you that there are others you can call.
3. If there is no one you can call, you can and should also go online to connect with others. For instance, you can go on Facebook to talk to a friend or relative who is online. You can also try different websites. Look at the last page for some organisations that have a 24/7 free phone service. If you go to a website about self-injury, it is important to recognize that some websites about self-injury may have triggering content. However, there are some great websites which can be helpful. It may also be helpful to find a local helpline (e.g., YouthLine, Lifeline) that you can call when you're upset.

## Listen to Music!

But, avoid triggering music that you know will worsen mood or that reminds you about self-injury. Listening to music, often played loudly, can provide some relief. Also, many people find that dancing vigorously to the music can be especially helpful.

## Exercise

Exercise intensely to raise your heart rate. You can run, jump, climb stairs, cycle, walk uphill, dance, fast pushups, use weights (if handy), etc. Exercising vigorously to raise your heart rate has been shown in research to be effective for some people as a way to manage urges to self-injure. It is important that the exercise be intense and lasts until the urge passes (breathing hard and sweating). Intense exercise may therefore serve as a healthy substitution for self-injury and coping with intense, difficult emotions.

## Do a Creative Activity

- You can sing, play an instrument, sketch, paint, sculpt, etc.
- Some individuals say that being able to express their intense emotions through a creative outlet can be helpful.
- Others find that a creative activity can distract or is so involving that it helps to not act on the urge to self-injure.

## Play or Cuddle with a Pet

Cuddling with a pet can be very soothing and comforting. Many people find that cuddling with a favourite pet helps to avoid acting on an urge to self-injure. This can also be done together with other strategies. For example, waiting the 15-minutes and using the 15-minute wait-rule with cuddling a pet can increase the effectiveness of both strategies.



## Where Can I Find More Information?

There is a growing selection of tools and guides available online to help those who self-injure, their loved ones and the professionals who are working with them. Here are some places we recommend:

**The Mental Health Foundation in New Zealand** offers online factsheet with advice about self-care and supporting others, and links to other resources and help services.

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/a-z/resource/49/self-harm>

**Common Ground** – a short guide for parents, families and friends of teenagers:

<http://www.commonground.org.nz/common-issues/the-hard-stuff/self-harm/>

**Youthline** provides real-time 24/7 free phone, text, email and online counselling to support young people who are self-harming – and can also provide this support for parents and family.

Free phone 24/7: 0800 376 633, free text 234 or email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz)

<https://www.youthline.co.nz/self-harm.html>

**Lifeline** provides real-time 24/7 free phone, text, email and online counselling to support young people who are self-harming – and can also provide this support for parents and family.

Free phone 24/7: 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE)

## Acknowledgement

This resource was adapted from materials created at McGill University and the University of Guelph, by their expert teams of researchers and practitioners. To see more about them and their world-class work, go to [www.sioutreach.com](http://www.sioutreach.com)

**Disclaimer:** All information in this guide is provided for information and education purposes only. The information is not intended to substitute the advice of a mental health professional. You should always consult your doctor for specific information on personal health matters, or other relevant professionals to ensure that your own circumstances are considered.

Please feel free to download and share this resource where it can support a person or their family experiencing self-injurious behaviours.

