

Lesson 4: Unhealthy coping strategies (self-harm and eating disorders)

Key stage 3

This is the fourth in a series of five key stage 3 lessons exploring mental health and emotional wellbeing. This lesson focuses on unhealthy coping strategies, specifically self-harm and eating disorders. Neither this, nor any of the other lessons, is designed to be taught in isolation, but should always form part of a planned, developmental PSHE education programme.

NB: It is essential that this lesson is followed by lesson 5, which provides students with a range of healthy coping strategies for managing challenging circumstances. See also the notes in 'Climate for learning' below.



Learning objective

Students will learn:

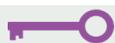
- about unhealthy coping strategies, including self-harm and eating disorders
- why, when and how to access support for themselves or others



Learning outcomes

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- explain why self-harm and eating disorders are unhealthy coping strategies
- recognise misconceptions about unhealthy coping strategies
- recognise warning signs of emotional difficulties; identify suitable sources of support, and explain why, when and how to seek help for themselves or others



Key words

Unhealthy coping strategy, self-harm, eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, triggers, misconception, healthy coping strategy, warning signs



Climate for learning

Before teaching these lessons, ensure that you read the accompanying PSHE Association document [Teaching about mental health and emotional wellbeing](#) for guidance on establishing ground rules, the limits of confidentiality, handling questions, and additional advice relating to teaching about mental health effectively and safely.

****Important note! In this lesson particularly, it is important not to talk about specific ways in which people harm themselves, ways in which people might hide their self-harm, specific ways in which people lose weight, purge or hide disordered eating, as this could provide instruction to any students who are more vulnerable in this area. It is also important not to discuss numbers when discussing weight loss, or to share extreme images, as this can provide a 'benchmark' or aspirational example for young people more at risk of vulnerabilities. The aim is to provide students with sufficient knowledge to be able to identify when help is needed and the skills and attributes to access that help, rather than to provide in-depth knowledge of these issues.***



Resources required

Box or envelope for anonymous questions



Resource 1: Five opinions



Resource 2: Understanding self-harm & eating disorders leaflet



Resource 3: Case study (part 1, 2, 3)



Resource 4: Decision tree



Resource 5: Card sort



Activity	Description	Timing
1. Questions please	Students are given an opportunity to submit anonymous questions on self-harm and eating disorders *(Allow time for this before the lesson if possible)*	5min
2. Introduction	Revisit ground rules and introduce lesson objectives and outcomes.	5min
3. Baseline assessment	Students respond to five opinions about self-harm and eating disorders. This will help to explore myths and misconceptions.	10min
4. Case study – part 1	As a class, read about a character displaying warning signs and respond to questions.	10min
5. Case study – part 2	In pairs, students create a decision tree for the consequences of two characters' decisions about whether to get their friend help.	10min
6. Case study – part 3	In the final section of the case study, students consider how to start a supportive conversation.	10min
7. Signposting	Promote sources of support, referring to the Understanding self-harm and eating disorders leaflet. NB: It is essential to include this section, even if short on time	5-10min
8. Endpoint assessment	Students revisit the baseline assessment to demonstrate how their opinions may have changed	5min

Baseline assessment



Questions please!

(Allow time for this before the lesson if possible.)

Give each student a slip of paper and invite them to write down any questions or comments they have about self-harm or eating disorders and put these in the anonymous question box or envelope. To make sure students do not feel self-conscious about asking a question, encourage everyone to write something: either a question or 'no question'.

Explain that as many as possible of these questions will be addressed during the lesson but we may need to return to some later. Address them at appropriate points throughout the lesson and return to any that remain outstanding at a later point.



Introduction

Establish or reinforce existing ground rules – add or emphasise any ground rules that are especially relevant to this lesson. Ensure students know they have a right to pass and that there should be no personal stories.

Share the learning objectives and intended outcomes for the lesson. Explain that self-harm and eating disorders are topics which are not widely talked about but they will be our focus today. It is OK to ask questions and explore the subject in a frank and honest way in the lesson but the discussion should stay in

the room. If a question is not appropriate to answer with the whole class, then you will explain why or address it individually after the lesson. Highlight who students can speak to outside of the lesson if they are worried about themselves or a friend, and outline the limits on confidentiality.

Make it clear at this point that you won't be talking about specific methods of self-harm or disordered eating and ask them not to either, as this can be unhelpful or counterproductive for people more vulnerable to unhealthy behaviours.



Baseline assessment activity



To introduce this activity, display **PPT slide 14 (member-only version)**, which provides a definition of unhealthy coping strategies, self-harm and eating disorders (see also below).

- Unhealthy coping strategies are behaviours people use to deal with difficult emotions, which have long-term negative consequences.
- Self-harm describes a wide range of ways in which a person might hurt themselves, put themselves at risk or neglect to take care of themselves, in order to manage difficult thoughts, feelings or experiences.
- An eating disorder is a serious mental health condition involving extreme, unhealthy eating behaviours and can take various forms, such as anorexia, bulimia and binge eating disorder.

Next, put up around the classroom A3 copies of **Resource 1: Five opinions**. Ask students to move around the room rating their response to each opinion from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Encourage students to add words or phrases that explain the reason for their view or that respond directly to the statement.

Circulate during the baseline assessment activity to get an idea of student responses. When everyone has had a chance to add ideas to all five sheets, bring the class back together and highlight any insightful responses.

At this point, emphasise that these opinions are all misconceptions about self-harm and eating disorders and that in today's lesson you will be exploring the realities.

Hand out **Resource 2: Understanding self-harm and eating disorders leaflet** and read through the 'myth-busting' sections as a class. Allow students to keep the leaflets on their desks to reference throughout the lesson. It is advised they are also made available for students to take away after the lesson.

Core activities



Case study – part 1



As a class, read **Resource 3: Case study (part 1)**. Ask students to discuss in pairs and feedback responses to the following questions:

1. What is Pete experiencing right now?
2. What warning signs might make someone concerned about their friend?
3. What could Yasmin do next?

Ensure that responses include:

1. *It is not clear what is happening for Pete at the moment, although it is possible he is suffering from depression or anxiety. There are signs that he has developed unhealthy coping strategies, possibly self-harm or an eating disorder. Even though we don't know for sure what Pete is going through, it is clear his behaviour has changed and he needs some support.*

- Pete has become disconnected from his friends, is avoiding socialising, has changed the clothes he is wearing, he is tired and easily distracted, he becomes defensive and loses his temper quickly, his mood is getting worse. Additional warning signs might include lack of decision making, tearfulness, worrying posts on social media, signs of physical harm such as harm or injury, significant changes in body weight or appetite, changes in habits and acting out of character, including drug-taking. It is important to point out that while each of the warning signs in Pete's scenario, considered on their own as a one-off, may not be worrying, but noticing several changes, or continued issues over time might increase concern.
- Yasmin could try to talk to Pete again, or could talk to another trusted adult (e.g. a parent or teacher).

Support:

Remind students to refer to **Resource 2: Understanding self-harm and eating disorders** leaflet to support their answers, and could use highlighters to identify warning signs in part 1.



Case study – part 2



Ask pairs or small groups to continue reading **Resource 3: Case study (part 2)**. In this section, Yasmin goes to speak to a mutual friend to discuss her concerns about Pete.

Ask students to work in groups to complete **Resource 4: Decision tree** using the card sort provided (**Resource 5**). Students should begin by organising the cards into two piles; consequences that are likely for Yasmin's course of action (seeking help) and Dimitri's course of action (ignoring it). They can then place the cards onto the decision tree in a sequence showing a timeline of potential consequences.

*Take feedback from this activity, using a copy of **Resource 5**. The cards are currently organised with consequences for Yasmin's choice on the left column (chronologically from top to bottom) and on the right-hand side for Dimitri's choice. During this discussion, it is essential to emphasise that if anyone has concerns about their friend, they are doing the right thing by seeking help for them.*

Optional development: To further develop this activity, ask students to add their own additional branches showing the likely consequences of each card. For example, reflecting on how Pete or his friends might feel, the impact on Pete's mental health, school work, relationships with others, etc. Remind students to keep this activity safe by being sensitive with their suggestions.

Support:

Students could just organise the cards into two piles; consequences of Yasmin's choice and consequences of Dimitri's choice.

Challenge

Following the decision tree activity, students could continue the scripted conversation, showing how Yasmin successfully convinces Dimitri that they should get further support for Pete.



Case study – part 3



As a class, read **Resource 3: Case study (part 3)**. In this section, Yasmin seeks further advice and uses this support to speak to Pete about her concerns. Organise students into five small groups and ask them to discuss and prepare feedback for one of the following questions each:

1. Was Yasmin right to talk to her dad about Pete's problems?
2. How might Yasmin have started the conversation with her dad?
3. What advice might Yasmin's dad have given her?
4. How might Yasmin have started the conversation with Pete?
5. Pete asks Yasmin not to tell anyone else. What should Yasmin do next?

Take feedback as a class so all students gain learning on each point.

Ensure that responses include:

1. *Students may have varying opinions. It is important that if Yasmin is worried, she has someone she can trust to talk to. However, there might be concerns that Yasmin's dad might not give appropriate advice, might not understand, or might want to call Pete's parents and talk to them about it. Emphasise that Yasmin probably chose her dad to speak to because she felt she could trust him to respond appropriately. Helplines and school staff can all be useful ways to get support in this situation.*
2. *It is helpful to point out that when starting a difficult conversation, it is important to choose the right time and place, so that the conversation can be had privately and not rushed. Yasmin could use phrases such as "Dad, I have something really important/serious to talk to you about..." "Can I ask your advice about my friend? I'm worried about him..."*
3. *Yasmin's dad is likely to have advised her to try to talk to Pete again, finding an appropriate time and place. He might have helped her do some research about how to support a friend in need, e.g. showing her sections of the Childline or Young minds websites. They might have thought together about how Yasmin could start the conversation with Pete, and what to do if Pete still didn't want to talk about his problems, including options such as any anonymous reporting methods the school might have.*
4. *Yasmin could try some of the following phrases "Pete, please can we talk, I'm worried about you" "I've noticed you seem different recently, I want to help" "When you're ready, I'm here to talk with you about anything that's worrying you" "You remember when I tried to talk to you before? Can we try again now?"*
5. *Yasmin's in a difficult situation – Pete's asked her not to tell anyone but he does need further help and is unlikely to get this without someone else being told (e.g. a parent, a doctor, a teacher). The risks to Pete if Yasmin says nothing are potentially quite serious, so Yasmin would be a better friend in this situation to say something, even if it might (at least at the beginning) affect their friendship.*



Question response



Ensure you allow time to respond to students' anonymous questions. Many questions may have been answered through the lesson content, but those that have not should be responded to.

If questions were submitted at the start of this lesson – rather than the previous one – you may prefer to wait until the start of next lesson to answer them. This will allow time to research and ensure the accuracy and appropriate level of detail in the answers.

Plenary/ Assessment of learning



Signposting support



Refer back to **Resource 2: Understanding self-harm and eating disorders leaflet**, and allow students time to read through on their own. To encourage students to engage with the leaflet, you could use some prompt

(Cont.)

questions to direct them to particular sections, for example:

- What service might be best for Pete to access and why?

Students could be encouraged to take copies of the leaflet away with them. You may also choose to make the leaflet available in other locations in the school, if appropriate, for example in pastoral offices, the library or school nurse/counsellor's office.

Remind students that they can access support at home, and both in school (e.g. through their form tutor, head of year, or school nurse) and out of school, through local and national organisations.

Explain to students that there are lots of different ways that young people can seek help from reputable organisations, including text-based support, digital chat support and online counselling, as well as face to face or via phone.

Share the following websites and phone numbers with students:

Young Minds - www.youngminds.org.uk

Childline - www.childline.org.uk Phone: 0800 1111

Samaritans - www.samaritans.org Phone: 116 123

Shout - a 24-hour text service for someone experiencing a crisis and needing immediate help: 85258

BEAT - www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk Phone: 0808 8010711



Endpoint assessment

Revisit the baseline myths and misconceptions, by asking students to reflect on whether their responses have changed, or whether they could add more detail to their responses based on today's learning. This could be written in student books, or on a postcard to be handed in at the end of the lesson. This can be kept as assessment evidence and used to inform future teaching.

**It may be necessary to lift the mood after this learning - ensure the lesson ends on a positive note, using a strategy of your choice (see accompanying PSHE Association document [Preparing to teach about mental health and emotional wellbeing p12](#)).*

Extension activities →

**The content of this lesson is not appropriate for home learning. Students should never be asked to research self-harm or eating disorders online as pro self-harm and eating disorders websites can be instructional, encouraging, or inspiring for students who are more vulnerable in this area.*