

A photograph of a young man and a young woman smiling at each other. The man has dark curly hair and a small stud earring, wearing a blue and white raglan shirt. The woman has shoulder-length brown hair with a pink-to-black gradient, wearing a yellow t-shirt. They are outdoors, with a blurred background of greenery and a building.

#before

#during

#after

# Visiting Your General Practitioner

A guide for young people with lived  
experience of self-harm and suicidality

## **Suggested citation**

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# Intro

## **Self-harm is when someone hurts themselves deliberately.**

This could include cutting, poisoning and burning. Self-harm is common among young people. Although young people who self-harm do not always do this because they want to end their life, repeated self-harm over a long period could be a sign that a young person might be thinking about suicide.

We know that many young people find it very difficult to find the right words to describe how they feel.<sup>1</sup>

“

I was a kid, I was scared. I didn't know what the hell was going on. My childlike instinct was screaming inside of me 'this ain't right, you should be scared.' I guess deep down, below my mental health demons, deep down, I really did want to be helped, and I wanted that support

”

**SOPHIA**

It can be even more difficult finding the right words to talk about self-harm and suicidal experiences with a medical professional; and, ask for help.

We know that visiting your General Practitioner (GP) to talk about self-harm and suicidal feelings can be very frightening. This is because you might not know what to expect; you might feel anxious or embarrassed; or you might even be wondering whether a GP can help with these experiences.

These and many other reasons often stop a young person from making an appointment to see their GP or seek help altogether.

**Visiting your GP is the first step towards getting the support you need and deserve.**

A GP can offer help and advice for general health and wellbeing matters, including mental health, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. GPs do not usually specialise in specific areas of medicine and so you might find that if you need specialist mental health support for self-harm or suicidal experiences, your GP might need to refer you to other services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) who specialise in helping young people who are struggling with their mental health.

**"It is important that you talk to your GP honestly and openly about any concerns you have in relation to self-harm and suicide."**

# This Guide

We have put together a short guide to help young people prepare to talk with their GP about self-harm and suicidal experiences.

This guide was developed in partnership with young people from the Youth Advisory Group (YAG) at the Institute for Mental Health and consists of the following sections:



# Before You Visit Your GP

## Make a list

Visiting your GP to talk about self-harm and suicidal experiences can be frightening. When you feel under pressure, you might find it difficult to describe how you feel and why you feel like that. You can write down a list of concerns, problems or questions you have before your appointment as well as what kind of help and support you want from your GP. A useful resource to help you make such a list and plan what you want to talk about with your GP is [DocReady](#).

“

Booking an appointment is one of the first steps but it is a scary step to have to take. It is important to find your voice and do what is comfortable for you. You only need to discuss what is comfortable, however it will be helpful to go into as much detail as possible. You can do this!

”

**KALEN**

# Before You Visit Your GP

## Booking an appointment

You can ring your GP surgery and speak to the receptionist in order to book an appointment. The receptionist will ask you what the appointment is for.

This might come as a surprise and you might not feel comfortable telling them the reason you want to see a GP. If that is the case, you can say that the appointment is for a personal health matter.

It might be possible to book an appointment online. You can ask the receptionist about this.

## **When you book an appointment, these are some of the things you could ask the receptionist for:**

- If it is possible to see the same GP you have seen in the past; or a different one. Be mindful, however, that this might not always be possible because of how busy GP practices can be.
- If you can see a female or male GP, as you'd prefer.
- If you can have a chaperone (e.g. practice nurse) who can accompany you in the appointment.
- If there is a GP in the practice who has experience or interest in mental health.
- If you can book a double appointment.

## **Bringing someone to support you**

Whether this is the first time you are visiting your GP or not, talking about self-harm and suicidal feelings can be difficult. You can bring a trusted friend, a family member, or anyone who can support you, with you to the appointment.

They can sit in the waiting area or they can join you in the appointment.



# During Your GP Visit

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## Confidentiality

You might be worried that if you tell your GP that you are self-harming or that you are feeling suicidal, then the GP would have to tell your parents or a mental health professional. It is important to know that what you say to your GP is confidential.

However, there might be cases where your GP has to share information with other professionals. For example, when they are trying to get you the best help you need, your GP might have to share information with the right people to do that.

Another example is when your GP thinks you might be at risk of death or serious harm (e.g. neglect or abuse). In order to protect you, it might be necessary for your GP to share information with others about you.

If your GP has to share information about you, they will ask for your consent first and they will tell you what information exactly they will share, with whom, and why.

You have to be mindful, however, that your GP might still have to share information about you without your consent. Although this might be upsetting, please remember that your GP has your best interest at heart and they want to do the right thing to keep you safe.



## Confidentiality

“

If a doctor has to disclose information about you to your family it can be terrifying and incredibly frustrating. It sucks and unfortunately that feeling does not go away but it is important to remember that this is one step closer to getting better. It is the beginning of the light at the end of the tunnel (as cheesy as that sounds!)

”

**KALEN**

# During Your GP Visit

## What your GP might ask

It can be stressful not knowing what to expect from a GP consultation. Below, are some questions that your GP might ask you during your appointment so they can find the best way to support you:

- How do you self-harm and where? You might be asked to show any injuries you have. This can feel very intrusive and stressful but it is so that your GP can determine whether your injuries need medical attention.
- How often do you self-harm?
- What goes through your mind before you self-harm?
- Are you thinking about ending your life? Have you made any plans?
- How is your sleep, appetite and mood?
- Do you have a support network including family, friends or peers you can turn to when things get bad?
- What helps you cope with stressful events (e.g. hobbies, distraction techniques)?

# During Your GP Visit

## What your GP might ask

It is important that you speak to your GP honestly and openly so they can find the best way to help and support you. Take your time and try to stay calm. If that means taking stress balls or doing deep breathing in the appointment, then do it!

“

During my GP appointment my head was swimming with anxious thoughts. Doing deep breathing and using grounding techniques such as naming items I could see in the room really helped me. Telling my GP I felt anxious and asking to pause when I felt overwhelmed really helped me to get through the appointment

”

**LIZZIE**

# During Your GP Visit

## What you might ask from your GP

You might find that it is difficult to process all the information your GP is giving you. Remember that you can ask from your GP to explain and repeat anything you do not understand. You can ask as many questions as you want.

You can also ask for advice, support and resources for self-harm and suicide (e.g. charities, helplines, local support groups) so you can work towards helping yourself too. At the end of this guide, we have included some resources you might find helpful.

## Medication

“

For me, medication has been extremely helpful. I think the most important thing to consider is if it is right for you, and for you only. It is 100% your choice whether you take it or not. Some people experience side effects, and others don't. Some medication works for some, and for others it doesn't. Remember, it is your choice and yours only. Make sure you ask your GP as many questions as you can think of and they'd answer every single one!

”

**JAMIE**

# During Your GP Visit

## Medication

It is perfectly understandable to have concerns about taking medication. You have the right to be fully informed about any medication that might be offered to you by your GP. You can ask your GP to explain: why you need to take medication; how and for how long; possible side effects; and, whether there are any alternatives.

This is so you can make an informed decision about your care. You have the right to ask your GP as many questions as you need and you have the right to ask for a second opinion (e.g. by consulting with another GP).

## Keeping you safe

“

Sometimes I felt so lost in my emotions that I struggled to know what to do. Making a safety plan with my doctor really helped me to navigate times like that. I stuck it on my bedroom wall and took a picture of it on my phone, so wherever I went I could use some of the strategies on there. It was really helpful and not something I could've done on my own

”

**LIZZIE**

# During Your GP Visit

## Keeping you safe

Self-harm and suicidal thoughts and feelings can come and go. It can be very difficult to manage these feelings, particularly if you are distressed and don't know what to do or who to turn to.

Ask your GP to help you make a plan to keep you safe. **This is called the safety plan.<sup>2</sup>**

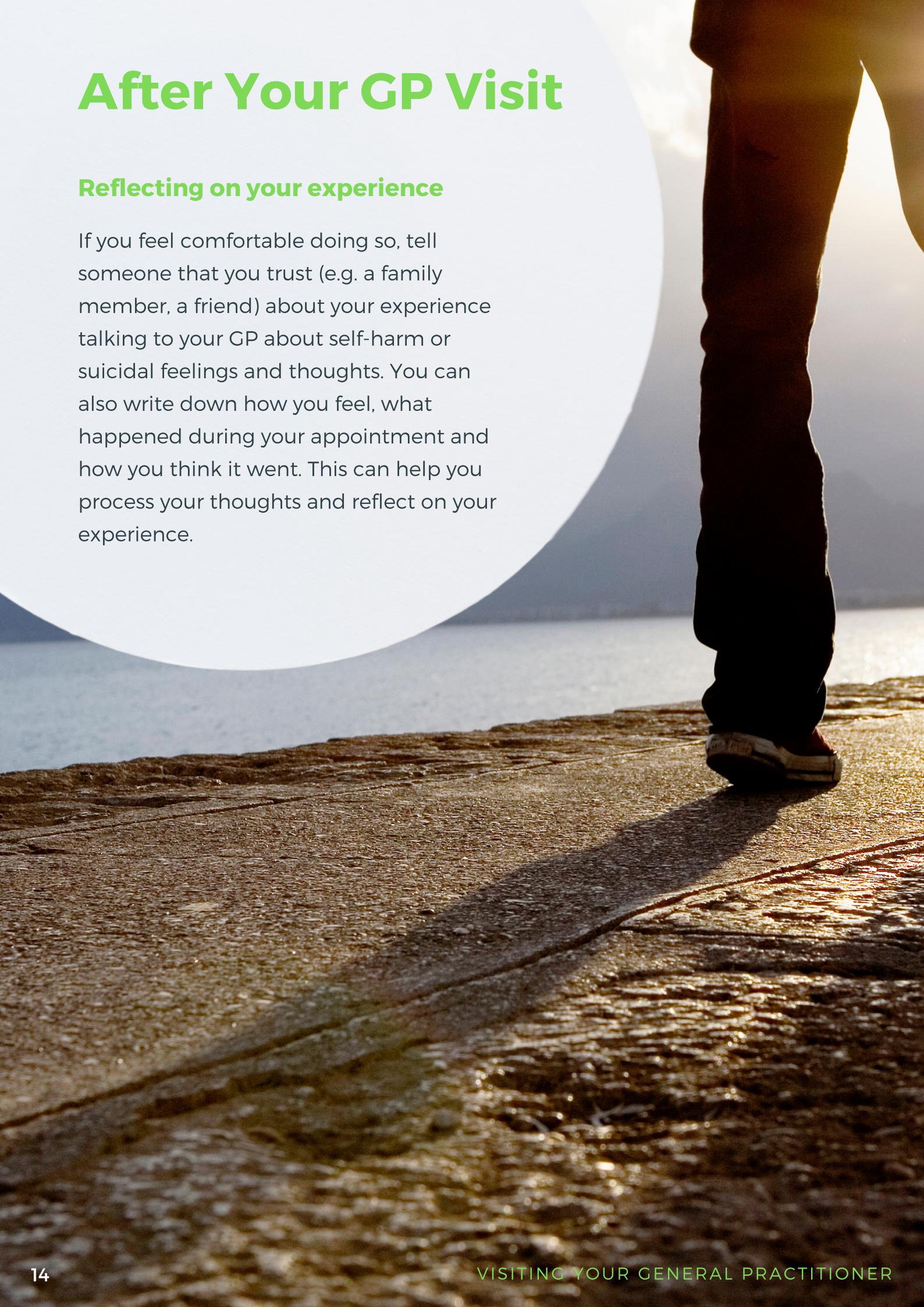
You can discuss with your GP any behaviours, feelings, situations or events that can trigger a suicidal crisis; and any coping strategies, resources or actions that you can use before or during a suicidal crisis that can make you feel better. A safety plan can also include a list of professionals or agencies you can contact during a crisis.

You can write down your safety plan, take a copy with you and use it whenever you feel you need to. You can refer to your safety plan at future appointments with your GP to see if it is still helpful or if anything could be changed or added.

# After Your GP Visit

## Reflecting on your experience

If you feel comfortable doing so, tell someone that you trust (e.g. a family member, a friend) about your experience talking to your GP about self-harm or suicidal feelings and thoughts. You can also write down how you feel, what happened during your appointment and how you think it went. This can help you process your thoughts and reflect on your experience.



# After Your GP Visit

## What next?

Referral to mental health services is often a lengthy and frustrating process. If your GP has referred you to a mental health professional, you can ask how long this process will take; and to keep you informed. Remember that sometimes it could take several weeks to see a mental health professional.

Things you can do in the meantime include:

- **Your GP can provide you with advice**, support and resources for self-harm and suicide (e.g. charities, helplines, local support groups). At the end of this guide, we have included some resources you might find helpful.
- **The safety plan** you have created with your GP is there to support you when experiencing suicidal thoughts or might be thinking of harming yourself. Your safety plan should also include a list of professionals or agencies you can contact during a crisis.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, you could **share with your family, your teacher and/or your friends** how you are feeling and let them know about your safety plan. This might help to keep you safe at times when you are struggling.
- Your GP might ask you to come back to see them in a few weeks (follow-up appointment). **This is so they can check how you have been feeling**. This is also an opportunity for you to ask for further support if you need it.

# After Your GP Visit

## What to do if you are unhappy with your consultation

Many young people, who have visited their GP to talk about self-harm and suicidal feelings, describe this as being a very positive and helpful experience.<sup>1</sup>

“

She took care of me because she was talking to my mum and me about how we were both feeling about it. She was very attentive and although she wasn't my main doctor, she is one of my favourites personally because I just feel really looked after whenever I go to see her

”

**SOPHIA**

# After Your GP Visit

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## What to do if you are unhappy with your consultation

However, things might not always go as well as you would have hoped. You might find that you are unhappy with your GP and the support, care and information they have offered you. This can be very disappointing and sometimes it can put young people off from seeking further help.

Here are some things you can do, if you are unhappy with your consultation:

- You can ask for an appointment with another GP in the same practice.
- You can register with another GP practice.
- You can make a complaint about your GP or your GP's surgery. You can do this by asking the receptionist for a copy of the surgery's complaints procedure. They will give you a form that you would need to complete; and you can ask for a friend or family member to help you complete this.

# Things to keep in mind



When you are experiencing a suicidal crisis, you might feel trapped and lonely. You might feel there is no way out and that your family and friends are better off without you. This can be very distressing and frightening.

**Visiting your GP is an important first step towards getting help and support.**



**Always remember that you have options;** and you can discuss different options with your GP, family and friends before you decide what the right help is for you.



Many young people feel guilty for burdening their GP with matters related to self-harm and suicide. It is important to remember that your GP is there to offer help and advice for any health related matters, including mental health, self-harm and suicidal thoughts. **Your GP has your best interest at heart.**

# Resources For Young People (In The UK)

## HELPLINES

### **Childline**

Call: 0800 1111

### **Papyrus**

Call: 0800 068 4141

Text: 07860 039 967

Email: [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)

### **Samaritans**

Call: 116 123

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### **Young Minds**

Young Minds Crisis Messenger:

Text YM to 85258.

## INFORMATION / ADVICE

[The Mix](#)

[Student Minds](#)

[Mind](#)

[DocReady](#)

[Stonewall](#)

[Citizens Advice](#)



## REFERENCES

1. Farr, J.; Surtees, A.D.R.; Richardson, H.; Michail, M. Exploring the processes involved in seeking help from a General Practitioner for young people who have been at risk of suicide. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* 2021, 18,
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