🔒 Digital Self-Harm
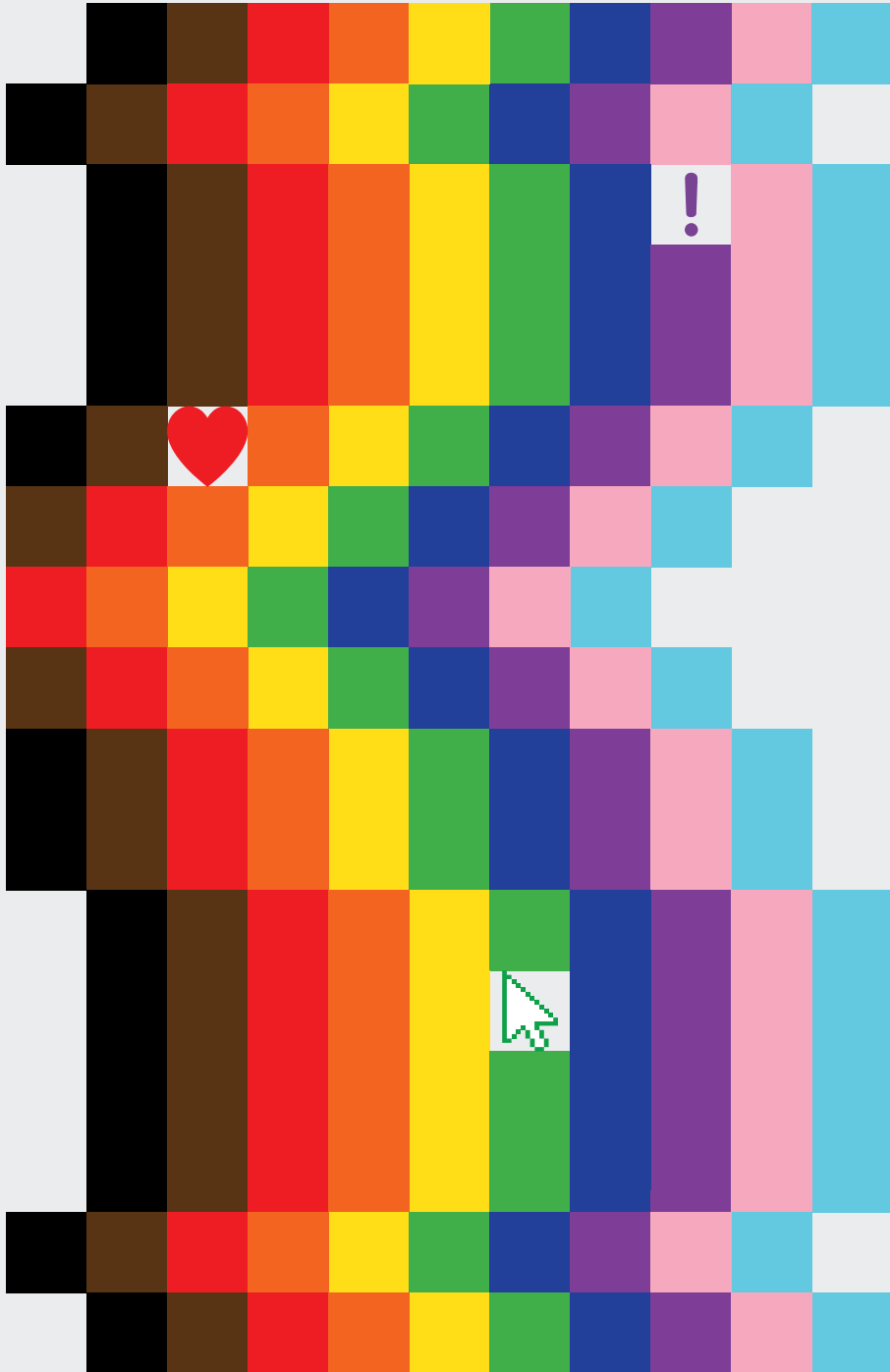
Content warning

This resource contains mentions of: physical and emotional harm, addiction and recovery, cyberbullying, LGBT+phobia, anxiety, triggers (non-specific)

Introduction

What is self harm?

Self harm *(sometimes shortened in online spaces to SH)* is when someone causes physical or emotional harm to themselves on purpose. There are lots of reasons why someone might do this, and it can be hard for someone to stop doing it.

What is digital self harm?

Digital self harm has lots of definitions and can include different things. In this guide, we will describe it as using social media and the internet in order to harm yourself. Usually, digital self harm is emotional harm.

Digital self harm can be different to other types of self harm. This is because people who are digitally self harming might not start out by meaning to harm themselves. Sometimes people who are digital self harming believe that they need to continue doing what they are doing even if it hurts them. When digital self harm is talked about in the media, people tend to talk about children and young people creating social media accounts to send abusive comments to themselves. This is an important issue and it affects LGBT+ people. LGBT+ communities also face some specific types of digital self harm.

Unfortunately, there are some people who spend a lot of time writing abusive things about LGBT+ people on the internet. This means it is very easy for LGBT+ people to find websites and social media posts that say hateful things about them.

There are lots of different reasons why LGBT+ people might go online to look for anti-LGBT+ information. In this guide, we think it could be digital self harm if looking at anti-LGBT+ information online:

- Is making you very upset
- Is done before you physically harm yourself
- Is happening all the time or is a habit
- Is taking up a lot of your time or stops you from doing other things
- Causes anxiety symptoms before, during, or after doing it
- If you are finding it difficult to stop
- If you feel like you need to do it when you are feeling sad or worried

You can find out more about anxiety symptoms on the NHS website:

https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/symptoms/

Why have we made this guide?

It can be hard to talk about digital self harm. There is not much information or support for LGBT+ people who may be digitally self harming. People who are digitally self harming might feel embarrassed, or ashamed. People who are digitally self harming might feel like it's too hard to ask for help. You might not know if you are digitally self harming or not. We hope that this guide helps start a conversation about this important issue and how we can keep each other safe.

Co-production and thanks

This guide would not be possible without the amazing work of LGBT+ communities, and in particular Hannah Pittman, who has worked with us to bring this to life. We also want to thank the members of our social group, They/Them/Us, who helped to discuss what needed to be a part of this guide. Thank you for telling us about the need for this guide, and for trusting us to work with you to create something that our communities can see themselves in. We hope that your dedication and bravery means that we will start to see more resources and support for people who are digitally self harming now that you have started the conversation.

Different Kinds of Digital Self Harm

Self Cyberbullying

Self cyberbullying is when someone sends hateful and abusive messages to their own social media account or phone number, often to make it look like other people are sending them. The accounts used to send these messages are often called "fake accounts" or "sock puppet accounts". The fake accounts can be made up people, or pretending to be other real people.

Conflict Seeking

Conflict seeking is when someone looks for people online who hold views that are strongly against their values and beliefs. They get into debates or arguments with people who will fight back with equal passion. The person getting into debates or arguments might want to change people's minds, but it can become harmful if they are always arguing or debating with people who are always likely to argue back.

LGBT-phobic Content Checking

Content checking is when someone keeps going to check websites and checks hashtags and accounts of social media where they know they will find LGBT+phobic content. People often justify this to themselves by saying that they need to know about any plans to attack LGBT+ rights. They might say this even if they know that checking for the content will not change anything and will only make them feel worse.

There are some things that can help you check if these kinds of self harm are becoming a problem for you.

Different places

Try to see if you are more likely to feel sad or overwhelmed in some places compared to others. It may be that you are more likely to feel you need to digitally self harm at home, work, university, or on public transport. Sometimes people feel this way about specific places, like a particular public bathroom you use frequently, or a single room in your house. These might be places that you use a lot so it can sometimes be hard to notice how they make you feel.

It is not always possible to stop going somewhere if you have noticed it makes you more likely to self harm. For example, if it is the only bathroom in your house, you will still need to use it. Even if you still need to go to that place, you can change things in that space to make it feel better for you. Some people find that changing lights, sounds, or smells can help. You could try dimming the lights or using a lamp, using a smell diffuser, incense or a scented candle, or playing different music. It's okay if the first thing you try doesn't work, you can try different things until you find something that helps.

💡 Lights	⬤
🎵 Sound	⬤
🧴 Smell	⬤
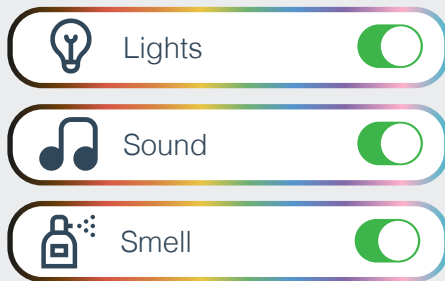
Even if you can't avoid places that are a trigger for you, it can help if you understand of which places may be difficult for you to visit.

Getting Support

If you think that you are experiencing some of the things we are talking about in this guide, then you have already taken a brave and important step by reading this guide. There are lots of ways that you can get support.

We talk about lots of different ways to get support, because everyone is different. This means not every kind of support is going to work for everyone. It's okay if something doesn't work for you, and it's okay if your first try doesn't work in the way you want it to. There is no one way to recover from digital self harm. It's important to remember that you haven't failed at recovering if you find it very hard to stop or if you start digitally self harming again. You can always work towards stopping digital self harm, even if you have tried in the past and it hasn't worked.

Talking about it

Feeling alone with the challenges that you're facing can be one of the hardest parts of stopping digital self harm. Talking to people you trust can give you a support network where you can talk openly about your experiences.

Sometimes people aren't sure who they can talk to about things like this. Other people find the idea of talking to a friend or a family member about digital self harm too scary. If you feel that way, you could try asking a therapist to support you to ask for help from the important people in your life when you need it.

If you feel isolated or find it hard to make friends, we have included some links at the end of this guide to help you create an informal support network.

Justifying what you are doing to yourself ⊙

Are you coming up with reasons why you did these things afterwards? Do you feel worried when you think about your reasons?

Feelings in your body ⊙

When you know you're about to send yourself messages, look at anti-LGBT+ content, or have an online argument, do you feel your heart pounding, your hands shaking, an increase in sweating, or a feeling like you need to fight or run away?

Repetition ⊙

Do you do these things every day or every week? Do you ever find that you end up doing these things without thinking about it?

Time blindness ⊙

Are you surprised by how much time has passed while you were doing these things? Do you find that you don't have time left to do other things?

Urges ⊙

Do you feel the need to do these things at times when you shouldn't, like while you are at work or studying? Do you feel unsettled or distressed if you can't do these things right away? Do you feel the need to do it when you are anxious or feeling sad? Do you find yourself doing it all the time?

Afterwards ⊙

Do you feel worse after you do it? Do you sometimes think that doing these things will help you feel in control, but feel less in control afterwards?

Triggers

A trigger is a situation or feeling that makes you think you need to react in a particular way. Triggers can be anything. Common triggers are smells, tastes, and being in situations that remind you of a situation that you have been in before. Sometimes it might be easy for you to understand how a trigger and reaction are linked, and other times the link between the trigger and the reaction might be unclear. One way to start taking control of your self harm is to understand your triggers.

Notice feelings in your body

Triggers can make our bodies react in different ways. This may include:

- 🔴 Increased sweating
- 🟠 Shaking or trembling
- 🟡 Hearing your own heart beat loudly in your head (palpitations)
- 🟢 Uncomfortable 'butterflies' feeling in your stomach
- 🔵 Feeling 'spaced out' or like you are not really here (dissociation and derealisation)
- 🟣 Tense muscles, like clenching your shoulders, jaw, and hands
- 🩷 Feeling like you need to fight or run away (fight or flight response)

Keeping track

If you feel you are about to do any kind of digital self harm, think about what happened just before to make you to want to do this. You could try writing in a diary or journal about what you remember happening. It could be a paper journal or on your phone. If you start to notice patterns, like there is a feeling or smell that makes you feel like you need to self harm, you may have identified a trigger.

📝 Journal 🟢   📊 Patterns 🟢

Personal Boundaries

Personal boundaries are how we keep relationships healthy. It's what we are comfortable or uncomfortable with happening or talking about with others. LGBTQIA+ people often don't have their boundaries respected by society. This means we sometimes find it hard to keep relationships healthy, because we don't learn how to have good boundaries.

Here's some tips on how to help keep good boundaries:

When asking for support:

- 🟥 Ask if someone is okay with you discussing your issues before starting
- 🟧 Check if there are topics someone might not want to discuss
- 🟨 Discuss when and where it is okay to discuss topics with someone

When giving support:

- 🟩 Be honest with when you can and can't offer support
- 🟦 Notice if you need to take a step back and tell the other person
- 🟪 Check if the person only wants their problem to be heard, or if they are looking for help in solving a problem

Talking Therapies 🎧

Talking therapies includes lots of different types of therapies that are useful for different people. Talking therapies can be a great place to start if you want to try reducing or stopping digital self harm. Speaking to a therapist can be very helpful because they are not involved in your life like friends and family members are. This means they can help you to see things in a different way.
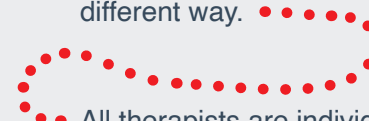
All therapists are individuals. This means that even if you know the type of therapy that you want to try, you might have a better experience with some therapists compared to others.

If you have no idea what type of therapy you want to try, that is okay too. You can ask your GP to refer you for therapy or you can approach an organisation that offers mental health support in your local area. If you ask an organisation that offers mental health support about therapy, they will usually be able to help you understand what kinds of therapy could help you most.
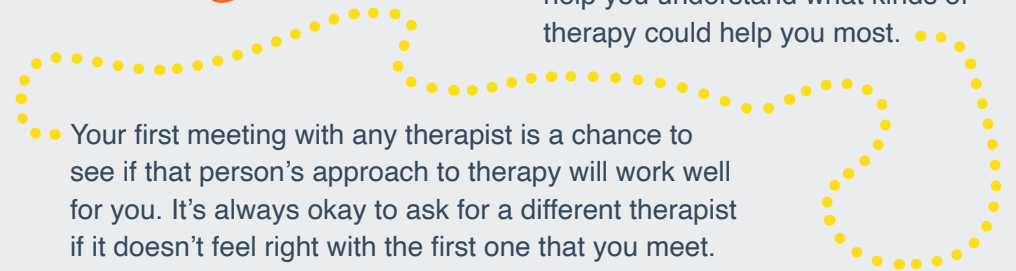
Your first meeting with any therapist is a chance to see if that person's approach to therapy will work well for you. It's always okay to ask for a different therapist if it doesn't feel right with the first one that you meet. Private therapists often offer a free phone call before you have the first meeting. This means you can speak to a few different therapists first before deciding who you would feel most comfortable talking to.

A therapist will help you to make a change that you want to make but they can't do it for you. This means it can sometimes take a bit more time than you think to understand why you are digitally self harming or to make the changes that you want to make.

🔒 Distractions and Habits 🔊 ↻

Distracting yourself can be a good way to stop yourself doing things you don't want to do. You can plan distractions for when you think you might need them. For example you can bring a nice object or a fidget toy on the bus with you to keep your hands busy to stop you from looking at your phone.

If you find that you suddenly get the urge to digitally self harm, you can use the things around you to try and distract yourself. If you're on the sofa you might switch on the TV and bundle yourself in a blanket. Some people find it helpful to go for a walk or put some loud music on. Anything that you can do straight away that takes your mind off things is helpful.

🔒 "Five Senses" Grounding Exercise 🔊 ↻

A useful technique to help ground yourself. Around you, name:

● **Five** things you can see :

_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

● **Four** things you can hear :

_____ _____ _____ _____

● **Three** things you can feel :

_____ _____ _____

● **Two** things you can smell :

_____ _____

● **One** thing you can taste (if possible) :

_____

You can also make new habits over a period of time that last longer than in-the-moment distractions. For example, if you end up scrolling social media after you get in from work, you could make plans to do something else in that time instead. You might pick up a new hobby or skill to learn, ideally one that is offline or one that you do with a friend.

⚠️ **New hobbies**

| Yes! | Please |

Or you could use that time for something relaxing, like meditating, taking a bath, or watching an episode of a series.

⚠️ **Time to relax**

| Yes! | Please |

Habits fill in your routine and give you less and less time to think about scrolling online.

It can take time to change your habits, and the first few times you do it could be really hard. It will get easier as you get used to reacting in a different way.

Self-care and community care

If you are digitally self harming, you are not alone. Chatting to other LGBT+ people can be a powerful way to get support with the challenges you're facing while you support other people at the same time. You don't need to be alone in recovery, and you deserve the support you need.

There are lots of support groups that you can reach out to for help. We've included information about some of these in our "Further Resources" section.

Support groups

LGBT Foundation	♡
Galop	♡
LGBT Switchboard	♡
TransUnite	♡
The Proud Trust	♡
Cybersmile Foundation	♡
Rainbow Noir	♡
LGBT Consortium	♡
Samaritans	♡

🔒 Further resources

LGBT Foundation

We have lots of ways we can help you with digital self-harm and other things you might be dealing with

- Website – www.lgbt.foundation
- Helpline – 0345 330 30 30 (open weekdays 9am to 9pm)
- Talking Therapies – www.lgbt.foundation/talkingtherapies

Galop

Working with LGBT+ people who are facing or have faced abuse

- Website – www.galop.org.uk
- Domestic abuse helpline – 0800 999 5428 (open Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm; Wednesday and Thursday 10am to 8pm)
- Conversion therapy helpline – 0800 130 3335 (open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm)
- LGBT+ hate crime helpline – 020 7704 2040 (open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm)

⚠️

New Habits	
Yes!	Please

LGBT Switchboard

Support services for LGBT+ people

- Website (including web chat) – www.switchboard.lgbt
- Helpline – 0300 330 0630 (open 10am to 10pm every day)
- Email – chris@switchboard.lgbt
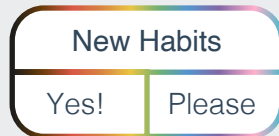
TransUnite

Website for finding local trans and non-binary social groups

- Website – www.transunite.co.uk

The Proud Trust

Support and youth groups for LGBTQ+ young people up to age 25

- Webchat – www.theproudtrust.org/proud-connections
- Find a youth group – www.theproudtrust.org/about-us/young-persons-services/the-proud-trust-youth-groups/

The Cybersmile Foundation

Digital wellbeing organisation tackling abuse and bullying online, with lots of resources and support

- Website – www.cybersmile.org

Rainbow Noir

Volunteer-led group by and for LGBTQI+ people of colour, mainly focused on Greater Manchester and the North West

- Website – www.rainbownoirmcr.com

LGBT Consortium

Supporting UK-based LGBTQ+ groups, organisations, and projects to develop and promote themselves. A useful way to find the right support for you

- Website – www.consortium.lgbt/member-directory

Samaritans

A voluntary organisation with a helpline and online chat for whatever is on your mind

- Website – www.samaritans.org
- Helpline – 116 123 (open 24/7, 365 days a year)
- Email – jo@samaritans.org (response time is around 24 hours)

We hope that this guide helps start a conversation about this important issue and how we can keep each other safe.

⚠ **Notice feelings in your body**

📊 **Keeping track**

Support groups
LGBT Foundation ♡
Galop ♡
LGBT Switchboard ♡
TransUnite ♡
The Proud Trust ♡
Cybersmile Foundation ♡
Rainbow Noir ♡
LGBT Consortium ♡
Samaritans ♡