

Plain English Summary

Many young people who self-harm struggle with intense emotions and difficulties in their relationships with parents, friends, and professionals. With the aim to better support them, we developed PRIMARY, a smartphone-based intervention that asks young people to record how they are doing each day for four weeks — their emotions, support from others, conflicts, and (thoughts about) self-harm. PRIMARY also provides weekly brief feedback and helps young people recognize patterns in their daily lives. In this study, we examined whether PRIMARY could help young people even before their treatment started, and how both young people and clinicians experienced using PRIMARY.

More than one hundred young people took part in the study. Half used the PRIMARY intervention and the other half did not. After four weeks, those who used PRIMARY were better able to regulate their emotions — in other words, they could cope with their feelings more effectively. On other outcomes, such as the amount of self-harm or the level of support from parents and friends, we found no differences between those who did and did not use PRIMARY. In the longer term — after about ten weeks of treatment — we also found no additional effects of PRIMARY, most likely because only a small number of participants completed this part of the study.

The daily measurements showed that each young person has a unique pattern of emotions, relationships, and self-harm. Self-harm did not appear to be an effective way to regulate emotions: most young people did not feel better afterward.

Overall, young people were satisfied with using PRIMARY. Most found the intervention easy to use and would recommend it to a friend. Clinicians consulted the PRIMARY data less frequently, but when they did, they considered it valuable.

In summary, these early findings suggest that PRIMARY can help young people better understand and regulate their emotions, is feasible to use, and is appreciated by the young people themselves. This makes PRIMARY a promising addition to care for vulnerable young people.